

For Reference

---

**NOT TO BE TAKEN FROM THIS ROOM**

# For Reference

---

NOT TO BE TAKEN FROM THIS ROOM

Ex libris  
UNIVERSITATIS  
ALBERTAENSIS











THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THEMATIC IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF EDITH SITWELL

by

JOHN BERNARD OWER

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA







UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA  
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled Thematic Imagery in the Poetry of Edith Sitwell, submitted by John Bernard Ower in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
	INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
I	SOME THEMES AND IMAGINATIVE PATTERNS IN THE EARLIER POETRY OF DAME EDITH SITWELL . . . . .	6
II	THREE NEGATIVE THEMES IN THE LATER POETRY OF DAME EDITH SITWELL, AND THEIR CONCOMITANT IMAGERY . . . . .	41
III	THE POSITIVE COSMIC CYCLE IN DAME EDITH'S LATER POETRY . . . . .	74
	CONCLUSION . . . . .	96
	FOOTNOTES . . . . .	102
	BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	116



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the kind help and encouragement provided in connection with this study by Dr. Sheila Watson and Dr. Eli Mandel of the Department of English of the University of Alberta, and also by Dr. H. M. McLuhan and Dr. Norman Endicott of the University of Toronto.



## ABSTRACT

The following study of thematic imagery in the poetry of Edith Sitwell is an attempt to relate some prominent images and image patterns in her work to certain themes and imaginative patterns which first appear in her early poetry, and then assume a predominant position in her later verse. In our first chapter, an analysis of certain early poems is undertaken with regard to three important themes: The destructiveness in human life of evil and time, and the state of contemporary society. The beginnings of a more positive vision of existence in Sitwell's poetry are likewise briefly discussed in the course of this analysis. The thematic study of individual poems is followed by an exposition of three imaginative patterns which seem to underlie much of the imagery in the poems discussed: ascent and descent through the "Aristotelian" levels of being, the "Frazerian" cycle of life and death, and the Biblical pattern of history.

The second chapter attempts to show that essentially the same negative themes which were treated in connection with the early poetry are likewise important in the later work. The imagery employed by Edith Sitwell in connection with these negative themes is then treated with reference to the three imaginative patterns discovered in the early verse. Chapter III treats in connection with the later poetry a consol-





ing and even joyous cyclical vision of existence, the beginnings of which were detected in the early work. This is once again followed by a discussion of relevant imagery in connection with the same three imaginative patterns which were outlined in the first chapter. To this is added a brief treatment of the possible influence of the theories of alchemy on the imagery used to express the positive vision of Edith Sitwell's later poetry.

The study is based throughout upon Edith Sitwell's own final selection, revision and arrangement of her work in the Collected Poems of 1957. This approach has the advantage of taking into account her own perspective upon the significance and the relative importance of her works.



## INTRODUCTION

The following study of thematic imagery in the poetry of Edith Sitwell is based primarily not upon a consideration of her poetry in the chronological order in which it was published over the years 1913-1957, but rather upon Dame Edith's own final selection, revision and arrangement of texts in the Collected Poems of 1957.<sup>1</sup> Such a procedure has the advantage of studying the body of the poet's work in the light of her own perspective upon the relative importance and the significance of her works. However, as Dame Edith's arrangement of her poems in the Collected Poems does not always follow the chronological sequence in which her pieces were actually published, and as certain of the poems underwent revision before they appeared in the 1957 volume, a word of explanation is in order.

Following Dame Edith's own procedure in the Collected Poems, I have divided her work for the purposes of study into early and late periods. The poems which precede the section entitled Later Poems in the 1957 volume constitute a generous selection of the pieces originally published in periodicals and collections during the years 1913-1933, with the sole exception of the second version of Metamorphosis, which appeared in 1946.<sup>2</sup> The Later Poems, on the other hand, with





a single exception, include only pieces which appeared during the period 1940-1954.<sup>3</sup> The two major divisions of the Collected Poems thus correspond as a whole to the actual order in which the pieces were published. Dame Edith's division also serves to throw into relief new developments in theme and method which are evident in the pieces appearing from 1940 onwards. The chronological gap between her two divisions corresponds to a period during which her publication of poetry slowed virtually to a halt.<sup>4</sup> Dame Edith's arrangement of her pieces into two groups in the Collected Poems thus serves to underline some major developments in her poetic career.

The poet's treatment of individual works within the two major divisions in the Collected Poems varies considerably. Some of the early poems appear in a revised form in the 1957 volume, or under changed titles. They are also sometimes arranged in groupings which place together poems written a number of years apart. Thus the group of poems which appears under the title Three Rustic Elegies in the Collected Poems represents a certain amount of revision and chronological rearrangement. The first of the three "elegies" to be published was The Little Ghost who Died for Love, which appeared in 1925 in Troy Park.<sup>5</sup> The Hambone and the Heart, which includes sixty-four lines from The Mother (1913) followed in 1927





in Rustic Elegies.<sup>6</sup> Finally The Ghost Whose Lips Were Warm was published in the Collected Poems of 1930.<sup>7</sup> It is in this volume that the three poems were first grouped together in an arrangement which persists in subsequent collections. In the meantime, Dame Edith had added several verses to The Hambone and the Heart.<sup>8</sup> The poem had undergone a further revision by the time it appeared in The Canticle of the Rose (1949), after which it remained unchanged.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Elegy on Dead Fashion first appeared in 1925 under the title Fashionable Intelligence, 1843.<sup>10</sup> The piece, "greatly revised and expanded," was republished under its final title in 1926. This version of the poem was in turn reworked and shortened by Dame Edith before it was included in the Collected Poems of 1957.<sup>11</sup> The core of the important poem Gold Coast Customs appeared in the volume of that title in 1929, but in the Collected Poems of 1930 twenty-six lines, greatly changing the over-all significance of the piece, were added. It is this expanded version of Gold Coast Customs which was printed in the Collected Poems of 1957.<sup>12</sup> In contrast with the poems just mentioned, the first published draft of "Metamorphosis" (1928) appeared without change in 1957.<sup>13</sup> However, it was accompanied in this volume by a second version of the poem, first published in 1946. This differs considerably from the original piece.

By comparison, the later pieces in the 1957 Collected Poems



almost without exception underwent little or no revision,<sup>14</sup> and there is a rough correlation between the order in which they appear and the actual sequence of their publication.<sup>15</sup> However, in some cases poems were removed by Dame Edith from their chronological order to illustrate and stress certain thematic preoccupations. For example, the first four of the Later Poems are not in fact the first to be published after 1940. An Old Woman did not appear until 1942, Invocation and Harvest until 1944, and Eurydice until 1948.<sup>16</sup> The grouping of these pieces together at the beginning of the Later Poems is evidently meant by Dame Edith to underline the importance in her later work of the "festive vision" discussed in Chapter III of this study. Similarly, Street Acrobat, The Stone-Breakers and The Coat of Fire, which appear together before Three Poems of the Atomic Age, were in fact contemporary with or later than the "atomic" poems.<sup>17</sup> In this case Dame Edith's aim is probably to provide a visionary introduction to the Three Poems of the Atomic Age by means of pieces dealing with the human evils which she sees as being responsible for the horrors of atomic war.

In conclusion, it may be observed that Dame Edith's revisions and rearrangements of poems in the Collected Poems of 1957 seem on the whole to underline rather than to obscure the thematic preoccupations and developments of her poetry. Thus, despite the numerous





revisions which it underwent, the 1957 version of The Hambone and the Heart conveys essentially the same vision, in the same images, as does The Mother. The theme of The Mother, which is the betrayal of love by lust as a manifestation of man's fallen condition, is merely emphasized by the second story of the young girl which was added to that of the murdered mother. The various revisions of the poem serve to increase its artistic effectiveness rather than to alter its essential message. Similarly, the grouping of The Hambone and the Heart with the two other "rustic elegies" underlines for us the preoccupation with themes of evil and decay which is so prominent in Dame Edith's early poetry. In this case, as in many others, the poet's treatment of her work in the Collected Poems of 1957 provides a valuable insight not merely into her own view of her poetic career, but into some of the actual facts of that career themselves.



## CHAPTER I

### SOME THEMES AND IMAGINATIVE PATTERNS IN THE EARLIER POETRY OF DAME EDITH SITWELL

As a preliminary to our examination of our central topic, the thematic imagery of Dame Edith Sitwell's later poetry, a brief study of some themes and imaginative patterns in certain of her earlier pieces, up to and including Gold Coast Customs, will be undertaken. Such a consideration will not only furnish an extremely useful background for our study of her mature work, but will also treat a subject well worthy of attention in itself. In this chapter, then, we will deal in some major poems with three salient concerns of Dame Edith's earlier poetry: the destructiveness in human life of evil and time, and the state of contemporary society. The working out of these intimately related themes in the earlier poetry laid much of the foundation upon which the later work is built. After we have discussed these concerns, we shall consider three major imaginative patterns which we first notice in the earlier poetry, and which likewise seem to lie behind a great deal of the imagery of the later work. Let us first consider Dame Edith's vision of the destructiveness of evil and time.





In the earlier poetry, Dame Edith sees these two forces at work not only in each individual lifetime, but also as acting upon humanity as a whole throughout the course of history. The most important form which the tragedy seems to assume in the case of the individual is the opposition of love, upon the one hand, and evil and time as causes of physical and spiritual degeneration upon the other. This opposition is a major theme in Three Rustic Elegies and Metamorphosis (1928). In The Ghost Whose Lips Were Warm, the third of the Three Rustic Elegies, we are confronted with the tragic paradox that, although human love is an eternal force which survives even in the grave, death still effects a permanent separation between lovers, which their enduring passion can only render more painful. In The Hambone and the Heart, the second of the Elegies, we have added to the tragedy of death the element of evil. In this poem we find two kinds of love: a selfless feminine devotion which finds expression in the physical and spiritual nurture of the mother, and a depraved masculine proclivity towards evil, corruption and death which takes the form of sexual lust.<sup>1</sup> The first kind of love is in two instances in the poem betrayed by the second: in the murder of a mother by her son in order that he may buy the favours of a harlot with her savings, and in the betrayal of a young girl by her lover. The association of the son who murders his mother with Judas, and of the harlot with Hell,<sup>2</sup>



indicate that Dame Edith sees this tragedy in terms of the Christian conception of man's fallen condition. Maternal love is really a Christ-like love, but, because maternity is also a function of a fallen human nature, the mother transmits a natural depravity to her son, and is unable to prevent his self-inflicted physical and spiritual destruction. Thus, the heart of the mother holds the "cold, blind earth" of her own physical nature responsible for the sins of her child, and blames her own love for him for not being strong enough to save him.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, her love and passion, in contrast with those of Christ, are both in vain. In The Little Ghost Who Died for Love, the first of the Elegies, we seem to have a similar vision of injustice and of the betrayal of love in a diseased or fallen universe.

In Metamorphosis we once again have a tragic vision of the overwhelming of love by the destructiveness of time. In this poem, our physical demise is seen as being only a part of a continual dying in time. Even the young suffer

The nights when creeping fear  
Crumples our hearts, knowing when age appear,

Our sun, our love, will leave us more alone  
Than the black mouldering rags about the bone?<sup>4</sup>

The process of aging is itself described in Metamorphosis in terms of animal imagery. It involves the attack of the "appalling lion-claws" of physical and spiritual decay, which produces an apishness of body





and soul; and a "tigerish" desire for life, which devours the heart.<sup>5</sup>

The death in life of this downward metamorphosis is seen by Dame Edith as even continuing in the grave, in a terrible life in death in which last vestiges of vitality are consumed by the "worm" or by hopeless love; the individual being finally reduced to the level of the inanimate.<sup>6</sup> Even at this stage of decay, the dead are envisioned as suffering the agonizing consciousness of lost love.<sup>7</sup>

However, Metamorphosis ends, not with Dame Edith in total despair, but with the conclusion that her terrible vision of the destructiveness of time was in fact the result of her own spiritual blindness, which she in turn seems to see as prevailing in her day and age.<sup>8</sup> Her contemporaries do not, just as at first she did not, see that physical and spiritual decay is only one side of the process of metamorphosis which is brought about by time. Time likewise causes rebirth and growth, and these involve an ascent up the scale of being:

. . .all things have beginnings; the bright plume  
Was once thin grass in shady winter's gloom,

And the furred fire is barking for the shape  
Of hoarse-voiced animals; cold air agape

Whines to be shut in water's shape and plumes;  
All this is hidden in the winter's glooms.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, it is implied, nothing is really lost in the passage of time. The death of one form is the birth of another, and metamorphosis is a cyclical process of ascent and descent through the various levels of being.





Accordingly, through what she describes at the conclusion of her poem as a religious experience, Dame Edith ultimately achieves in Metamorphosis a vision, not of man's ultimate destruction but of his "sad eternities" in the cycles of time.<sup>10</sup>

Thus it would seem that in Metamorphosis Dame Edith was beginning to see her way beyond the negative vision of the Three Rustic Elegies. In Metamorphosis there is a re-birth, even if it is "sad" for both the poet herself and for the world. Accordingly, Ralph J. Mills, Jr. is not really correct in seeing the poem simply as a step in a symbolic descent on Dame Edith's part to the "heart of darkness."<sup>11</sup> Her answer in this piece to the apparent destructiveness of time is essentially that which we see in the later poetry. However, in Metamorphosis Dame Edith resolved only the problem of the decay of the individual person through time, and not that of the human evil which we saw in The Hambone and the Heart, or that of the historical decay of the human race which we encounter in Elegy on Dead Fashion. Her awareness of these two problems seems to reach a climax in her tragic vision of the state of contemporary society in Gold Coast Customs. However, in order to understand this very important poem fully, we must first of all consider the poet's vision of the historical degeneration of humanity in Elegy on Dead Fashion.



In this poem, Dame Edith laments the passing of the golden age of man, and its replacement by what she sees as the degeneracy of her own day and age. The lost era in which she finds an ideal is essentially a pastoral world:

The world I see is a country world, a universe of growing things, where magic and growth are one, and wherein, as in George Peele's lines:

God in the whizzing of a pleasant wind  
Shall march upon the tops of mulberry trees;

a world of rough, fruitful suns, and the age of the innocence of man--  
of the forests

Where the wolf Nature from maternal breast  
Fed us with strong brown milk. . .<sup>12</sup>

This pastoral age of Elegy on Dead Fashion is, then, one in which time, because of the immanence of a creative Divinity in man and in nature, brings about life and growth rather than degeneration and death. Thus Dame Edith's longest description of her pastoral world in the poem follows the upturn of the seasonal cycle from early spring to summer.<sup>13</sup> Man himself in this age was mortal, yet the Divinity existing within him was somehow able to come to terms with chance, and to defy time:

O soul, my Lazarus! There was a clime  
Deep in your tomb of flesh, defying time,  
When a god's soul played there, began to dance,  
Deep in that tomb with divine, deathless Chance.<sup>14</sup>

In the golden age, the physical and spiritual principles in man were still close to their sources within and beyond nature:





In those deep ages the most primitive  
 And roughest and uncouthest shapes did live  
 Knowing the memory of before their birth,  
 And their soul's life before this uncouth earth.<sup>15</sup>

Man accordingly existed in the golden age as an integral part of a natural world in which the same spiritual and physical elements that made up his own being found constructive play:

. . .natural law and moral were but one, --  
 Derived from the rich wisdom of the sun.<sup>16</sup>

This "rich wisdom" in turn enabled man to come to a knowledge of "The secret of how hell and heaven grew."<sup>17</sup>

The state of human nature in the golden age of Elegy on Dead Fashion seems to be represented in the poem in Dame Edith's very distinctive presentation of the gods, nymphs and satyrs of Greek mythology. It was a time when, on the one hand, the Olympian deities walked the earth following the pursuits of country folk and, on the other, the satyrs performed rustic dances expressive of their half-human, half-animal natures.<sup>18</sup> Standing somewhere between these two orders of anthropomorphic beings were the nymphs, who seem to be the typical representatives of primeval humanity in Dame Edith's golden age. Her nymphs embody the most refined natural beauty in their persons, from which seems to grow organically the civilized elegance and sumptuousness of their costumes. Dame Edith apparently finds their exquisite beauty and elegance perfectly compatible with





the general earthiness of their times, so she sees them perhaps as the roses growing out of its loam.

In Elegy on Dead Fashion Dame Edith sees the golden age of humanity as having been completely destroyed by time, to be replaced by the degeneracy of the contemporary world. Modern man has become severed from the sources of his being in and beyond nature, and he has accordingly become both physically and spiritually decadent.<sup>19</sup> He has lost the "rich wisdom" of his pastoral existence, and his life has degenerated into a moribund artificiality and triviality:

. . . people build like beavers on the sand  
Among life's common movements, understand

That Troy and Babylon were built with bricks;  
They engineer great wells into the Styx  
And build Hotels upon the peaks of seas  
Where the small trivial dead can sit and freeze.<sup>20</sup>

Contemporary man's spiritual vision has degenerated to the point where worldliness hawks a trivial religion, "Showing the gods no larger than ourselves"<sup>21</sup> and a materialistic philosophy sees the deities as being the puppets of chance.<sup>22</sup> Humanity has accordingly become a prey to fears of decay and death. There is abundant evidence in Elegy on Dead Fashion that Dame Edith feels that for modern man himself this negative vision is indeed justified by his physical and spiritual decadence, which renders him the pawn of time and chance.<sup>23</sup> Thus, although she has glimpses in the poem of a vision of a continuing vitality, re-birth and growth in nature;<sup>24</sup> she sees man's soul as having fallen



from a god to a Lazarus, and his body as having suffered a corresponding decay:

These living skeletons blown by the wind  
Where Cleopatra, Thais. . . age unkind  
Has shrunk them so feeble and so small  
That Death will never comfort them at all.

They are so poor they seem to have put by  
The outworn fashion of the flesh!<sup>25</sup>

Accordingly, the elegance represented by the costumes of modern women, unlike that of the clothing of the nymphs, has become merely a tomb for the physical and spiritual deadness within.<sup>26</sup>

It will be noted that in Elegy on Dead Fashion and Metamorphosis, Dame Edith's personal vision of decay and death was inextricably bound up with what she conceived to be the attitudes of her age. In Metamorphosis, as we have seen, she began to find her own way beyond the fears of personal mortality which she saw haunting her times. However, this is evidently only one aspect of her own spiritual malaise, and of what she conceived to be that of her contemporaries. Her sense of the degeneracy of her world was intensified in Gold Coast Customs to a nightmare vision of its capacity for positive evil. We have already seen an essentially Christian conception of evil applied on a personal level in The Hambone and the Heart. It is this same vision of a fallen human nature, with the scope of its activity expanded in the sins of the rich to engulf a whole civilization that we find in Gold Coast Customs (1929-





1930). In this poem Dame Edith, as the confessor of her age, reaches the "heart of darkness." As Ralph J. Mills, Jr. notes, she undergoes in a very real sense the death of the spirit, to be re-born in an apocalyptic vision of the future redemption of society.<sup>27</sup> Before we proceed to discuss Gold Coast Customs more fully, we must examine in more detail Dame Edith's vision of the corruption of her age. In this respect, a short article entitled "Modern Values," which the poet published in 1928,<sup>28</sup> will be very helpful.

In this article Dame Edith records her fundamental antagonism to what she conceives to be the spirit of her day and age. For true spiritual values, she believes, her contemporaries have substituted the two unreal standards of speed and money.<sup>29</sup> In describing the hurry of her day in the article, she employs the image of a racing car attempting to set a new speed record around a circular track.<sup>30</sup> This image is, I believe, of particular significance for an understanding of her thought upon the subject. It shows her awareness of the connection of the speed of the modern age with the increasing mechanization of life in the early twentieth century. Of this mechanization and its associated hurry, the aeroplane and automobile must have formed particularly striking examples. The relatively great speeds which they were capable of attaining must have created a very strong impression upon the sensitive observer, and could have stimulated





him to examine the whole range of the effects of the progressive mechanization of life. At any rate, Dame Edith states in the introduction to her Collected Poems of 1957 with regard to her earlier work, that the "new vision" awakened in us by the machine age necessitated the finding of new "rhythmical expressions for the heightened speed of our times."<sup>31</sup>

This last statement shows the poet's further awareness of the intimate connection in modern life between mechanical speed and mechanical rhythm. The combined effect of these two factors is treated by her in more detail in her lecture, "Experiment in Poetry," which was published in 1929.<sup>32</sup>

If you will ask why the rhythms of modern poetry become more violent, the answer is: that this is an age of machinery--a wild race for time, confined within limits which are at once mad and circumscribed. Try to get out, and you knock your head against the walls of materialism. This state of things is mirrored in modern syncopated dance music, which removes music from the world of inspiration, which evolves itself organically from the need of the artist, and brings it into the world of machinery, where form is superimposed as a logical idea. There is no time or space in which to dream.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, in discussing speed in "Modern Values," Dame Edith states "So far as I can see. . . speed as calculated in modern terms means the elimination of most of the senses."<sup>34</sup> Thus, in her eyes, mechanical speeds and rhythms as reflected in contemporary life destroy both sensation and imagination, and impose a frantic, purposeless and circumscribed routine. This rhythm is external and mechanical, rather



than internal and organic. Modern life is, in short, invested for Dame Edith with many of the qualities of a nightmare. This observation is of considerable significance for understanding the radical construction of Gold Coast Customs.

After summarily dismissing the current cult of speed in "Modern Values," Dame Edith proceeds to attack what she conceives to be the contemporary attitudes concerning money, with particular reference to the wealthy. She sees the mere possession of huge fortunes as being spiritually meaningless, and their frantic getting and spending as being as mad as the attempts to set new speed records. "Money has no relation to life at present; it has no relation to anything real; it has no relation to the things which it buys. It has got outside human control altogether; it is a Frankenstein monster dominating the unhappy world which created it."<sup>35</sup> Modern values regarding money not only bear no relation to real standards, they are a source of positive evil. It is particularly the way in which huge fortunes are spent which excites Dame Edith's ire: ". . .this Frankenstein monster of money now offers the one garment which is allowed not only to cover, but to glorify, any kind of mortal sin. Nothing matters if you can spend more money than your neighbour; and if you can spend it in such a way that no one who really needs it benefits by it, then so much the better."<sup>36</sup> The great fortunes of the day thus corrupt their possessors,





and are of no benefit to the poor. Essentially, this thesis is the central theme of Gold Coast Customs.

We are now ready to begin our examination of that remarkable poem. In it we see the "Frankenstein monsters" of speed and money on the rampage, producing personal and social corruption on a vast scale. The piece was particularly inspired, Dame Edith tells us, by the sight of "some rich people who used to give parties in barges on the Thames off the embankment while these poor wretches [i. e., the destitute of the London slums] huddled on benches. I saw a man, obviously suffering from T. B., beating an empty food tin with a mutton bone. . . that put in my mind the poem Gold Coast Customs."<sup>37</sup>

In this poem, then, we find a new awareness of the physical and moral plight of the derelict of modern urban and industrial society. For this tragedy, Dame Edith blames the heartlessness and greed of the rich. However, as we shall see, their inhumanity in this regard appears in the poem as only one aspect of their total moral corruption by speed and money.

To give expression in Gold Coast Customs to her vision of the spiritual decay of both the rich and the poor of contemporary London, Dame Edith employs imagery derived from accounts and from artifacts of certain nineteenth century African tribes. Thus, as she herself tells us, the poem has three levels: "the negro swamp, which





is the spiritual state, the physical slum of starvation, and its mockery and mirror, the foul moral slum of the rich."<sup>38</sup> The particular facet of the savagery of the "negro swamp" which Dame Edith emphasizes symbolically in Gold Coast Customs for the purposes of her social criticism is its cannibalism. The spiritual significance of this practice for her is suggested by a passage from Hegel's Philosophy of History which she appends to her poem:

The Negroes indulge that perfect contempt for humanity which in its bearing on Justice and Morality is the fundamental characteristic of the race. They have, moreover, no knowledge of the immortality of the soul, although spectres are supposed to appear. The undervaluing of humanity among them reaches an incredible degree of intensity. Tyranny is regarded as no wrong, and cannibalism is looked upon as quite customary and proper. Among us instinct deters from it, if we can speak of instinct at all as appertaining to man. But with the Negro this is not the case, and the devouring of human flesh is altogether consonant with the general principles of the African race; to the sensual Negro, human flesh is but an object of sense--mere flesh. At the death of a king, hundreds are killed and eaten.<sup>39</sup>

It will be noted that in this passage the contemporary African is seen through the eyes of an enlightened and religious European, who regards each individual human being as being in possession of an immortal soul, which renders him spiritually and physically sacrosanct. In contrast to his own standards, he sees among the Africans of his day an appalling absence of spiritual values which in turn results in a sensual materialism. Human beings are accordingly treated by them merely as objects of sense, and this leads to a general



injustice and brutality in their social intercourse of which tyranny and cannibalism are particularly striking examples. Thus, in the Gold Coast customs from which the title of Dame Edith's poem is derived, "the death of any rich or important person was followed by several days of national ceremonies, during which the utmost licence prevailed, and slaves and poor persons were killed that the bones of the deceased might be washed with human blood."<sup>40</sup>

In Gold Coast Customs Dame Edith, with a terrible irony, equates Hegel's description of the spiritual condition and social behaviour of the primitive African with the state of contemporary London, which she would presumably see as typical of modern urban and industrial society. Together with Conrad in The Heart of Darkness and Golding in Lord of the Flies, she does not share Hegel's confidence that moral and social instincts inculcated by Western civilization necessarily save the European from the savagery of the African. While she shares that philosopher's moral attitude towards the behaviour of the Negro, she sees the savage's lack of spiritual values, his sensual materialism and his undervaluing of humanity as equally prevalent in contemporary London society, especially among the rich. She sees the emptiness and immorality of the wealthy as a spiritual death which, like the funerals celebrated in the Gold Coast customs, involves a brutal sacrifice of the poor.<sup>41</sup> In the greed and heartlessness which





stem from their general decadence, the wealthy are practising social cannibalism on a vast scale.

For the spiritual deadness of the rich which is responsible for this abomination, Dame Edith seems, in Gold Coast Customs, to blame the same factors in modern life which she treated in "Modern Values." Just as in that article she attacked the lack of real spiritual values in her day and age, so, in Gold Coast Customs, she seems to see at the heart of the moral degeneracy of the rich their lack of any living religious conviction:

But Lady Bamburgher's Shrunken Head,  
Slum hovel, is full of the rat-eaten bones  
Of a fashionable god that lived not  
Ever, but still has bones to rot:  
A bloodless and an unborn thing  
That cannot wake, yet cannot sleep,  
That makes no sound, that cannot weep,  
That hears all, bears all, cannot move -  
It is buried so deep  
Like a shameful thing  
In that plague-spot heart, Death's last dust-heap.<sup>42</sup>

This deadness to spiritual values is, of course, exactly what Hegel saw in the Negroes of his day; and Dame Edith, in Gold Coast Customs, ruthlessly drives home her equation of the spiritual state of the wealthy and that of the African cannibal tribes.<sup>43</sup>

In "Modern Values," as we have seen, Dame Edith sees the lack of real standards in her day and age as leading to the destructive ascendancy of speed and money in its life; and she seems to make the





same connection in Gold Coast Customs. Thus, in the figure of Lady Bamburgher, who typifies the spiritual condition of the rich, we seem to have personified the "Frankenstein monster" of money as it is described in "Modern Values." Just as in that article Dame Edith sees wealth being used as a cloak with which to cover mortal sin, so Lady Bamburgher and her entourage are able to buy "worm-skin and paper masks" to hid the marks of their moral plague.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, their parties are prime examples of the mad and socially useless spending of money which Dame Edith attacks in "Modern Values."

We likewise see in Gold Coast Customs the frantic speed of contemporary life which the poet condemns in her article. Thus, she tells us that the world which the poem portrays is one of "feverish, intertwining, seething movement, a vain seeking for excitement."<sup>45</sup> The connection which Dame Edith makes in "Modern Values" and "Experiment in Poetry" between this frenzy and the mechanical speed and rhythm of modern life is also reflected in Gold Coast Customs. Thus Dame Edith herself speaks of trying at times in the poem to achieve a "jaunty wire-jerked movement."<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Ralph J. Mills, Jr. notes the obvious connection between the syncopated rhythms of the piece and Dame Edith's remark in "Experiment in Poetry" that modern dance music is a reflection of the mechanical pace and rhythms imposed from without upon modern life.<sup>47</sup>



In Gold Coast Customs, this combination of spiritual emptiness and mechanical frenzy in the life of the wealthy is seen as having destroyed their civilized humanity. Accordingly, as we have noted above, imagery suggestive of the orgiastic rites of the African cannibal tribes is used in connection with the Bamburgher parties. However, Dame Edith sees the behaviour of the rich as involving further dimensions of degeneracy. At times, as we might expect, the movement and imagery of Gold Coast Customs conveys the impression that they have become mere puppets in their frantic immorality.<sup>48</sup> Besides suggesting the mechanical element in their lives, Dame Edith associates symbolically with their conduct a degeneration into lower animal forms upon the one hand, and the physical corruption of disease and decay upon the other. Thus she tells us that the movement of Gold Coast Customs is at times intended to suggest "worms intertwining" or "slowly rotting flesh."<sup>49</sup> Images of disease, decay and of the activity of lower forms of animal life, occur again and again in the piece in connection with the frenzy and immorality of Lady Bamburgher and her circle. Thus she herself is associated with the ape, the rat, the fly, and, above all, the worm; and she is described over and over again as being infected with the plague.<sup>50</sup> This rot of immorality is seen by Dame Edith as having destroyed the real substance of the humanity of the





rich. All that is left of them is their sensuality and an empty husk of appearance:

But at Lady Bamburgher's parties each head,  
Grinning, knew it had left its bones  
In the mud with the white skulls. . . only the grin  
Is left, strings of nerves, and the drum-taut skin.<sup>51</sup>

As we might expect, Dame Edith sees this spiritual vacuity as being ultimately a state of death in life. Thus the participants in Lady Bamburgher's parties are depicted as wearing masks made of the skins of dead animals.<sup>52</sup> Images of putrefaction, together with mud and dust, are also associated with them.<sup>53</sup> By means of such radical imagery, Dame Edith drives home with a vengeance the message that the wages of sin are death.

As we have noted above, the moral death of the rich, like the deaths celebrated in the Gold Coast customs, involves a sacrifice of the poor. Thus Dame Edith describes Lady Bamburgher's soul as a cannibal flesh-market, and sees her jewellery as the bones of dead men.<sup>54</sup> In another passage, she refers to the slum-dwellers as slaves, whose hearts have been eaten by the exactions of the rich, and who are reduced to machines which coin money for their oppressors.<sup>55</sup> The poor have decayed spiritually through want, just as the rich have done through their immorality. The lives of the destitute, like those of the wealthy, have been reduced to mere husks of appearance and sensuality. Thus a young prostitute who appears in





Gold Coast Customs, is described by Dame Edith as a "calico dummy."<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, the souls of the poor are just as lifeless as those of the rich, as the poet makes perfectly clear by the images of death which she employs in describing slum life.<sup>57</sup>

Thus in Gold Coast Customs, wealthy and destitute alike are seen as existing spiritually at the level of the Negro savage, with its concomitant degeneracy and death. Now just as Hegel sees the African cannibal from the point of view of a religious European, so Dame Edith ultimately judges the "negro swamp" of contemporary London by Christian standards of morality and justice. As Ralph J. Mills, Jr. notes in "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," this religious vision is purchased at the price of a spiritual death on the part of the poet.<sup>58</sup> Mills notes that in the pieces prior to Gold Coast Customs, Dame Edith was slowly but surely making a symbolic descent toward the "heart of darkness."<sup>59</sup> As we have seen in connection with the pieces which we have discussed in this chapter, this descent has two organically related facets: the poet's own personal misgivings, and her vision of the spiritual degeneracy of her age. In this regard, as we have seen, an important concern is the conflict of human love on the one hand, and the forces of physical and spiritual decay on the other. Although the poet achieved a partial solution to her problems in Metamorphosis, it is in Gold Coast Customs that she faces the whole com-



plex of spiritual difficulties which had been bedevilling her, and achieves a real victory over them.

Thus, as we have just seen in Gold Coast Customs, Dame Edith faces not only the spiritual sterility of her age which we discussed in connection with Metamorphosis and Elegy on Dead Fashion, but also, in its social evils, the depravity of man which she explored on an individual level in The Hambone and the Heart. Furthermore, as Dame Edith herself implies, the society which she depicts in Gold Coast Customs represents the nadir of the historical degeneration of man from the golden age which she treated in Elegy on Dead Fashion:

How far is our innocent paradise,  
The blue-striped sand,  
Bull-bellowing band  
Of waves, and the great gold suns made wise  
By the dead days and horizons grand.<sup>60</sup>

The essence of this degradation of the contemporary world is, as we might expect, its loss of the ability to love, either fraternally or romantically. Thus Lady Bamburgher is dead to the plight of the poor and to any form of sexual expression but lust.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Sally, the young prostitute who appears in the poem, has been robbed of the opportunity and the capacity for love by physical want.<sup>62</sup> Her spiritual being has been divided by poverty into lifeless dust on the one hand, and "black bones pressed in the House of Lust" upon the other.<sup>63</sup>





In facing this terrible vision of the spiritual death of contemporary society in Gold Coast Customs, Dame Edith engages in a death struggle with the personal devils which we have seen plaguing her in the poems which we have previously discussed in this chapter. Thus in two instances in Gold Coast Customs we see her becoming personally involved in the spiritual decay and death of contemporary life. In the first of these passages, which comes relatively early in the poem, the half of her heart which she has given in love to another is represented as having been devoured by her terrible awareness of the plight of the poor:

When the sun of dawn looks down on the shrunken  
Heads, drums of skin, and the dead men drunken  
I only know one half of my heart  
Lies in that terrible coffin of stone,  
My body that stalks through the slum alone,  
And that half of my heart  
That is in your breast  
You gave for meat  
In the sailor's street  
To the rat that had only my bones to eat.<sup>64</sup>

In the second passage, this same half of her heart is represented as being again destroyed by the spectacle of the moral degeneracy of Lady Bamburgher:

For this painted Plague-cart's  
Heart, for this  
Slime of the Worm that paints her kiss  
And the dead men's bones round her throat and wrist,  
The half of my heart that lay in your breast  
Has fallen away  
To rot and bray  
With the painted mud through the eyeless day.<sup>65</sup>





Thus Dame Edith's initial lack of the positive religious vision of Hegel means that her awareness of the state of contemporary society deprives her, just as rich and poor alike have been deprived, of the capacity to love. She accordingly becomes for the moment just as spiritually dead as they are. In her despair she can only grovel herself in the materialism and in the concomitant vision of decay and death which she sees as ultimately responsible for the condition of society.<sup>66</sup> As in Elegy on Dead Fashion, this spiritual plight is accompanied by the poet's laments over the loss of the age of the innocence and the wisdom of man.<sup>67</sup>

Dame Edith's descent to a state of spiritual death in life in Gold Coast Customs is followed, after some further agonizing contemplation of the state of contemporary life, by the first stages of her re-birth. Her resurrection begins with a radical vision of the poor as Christ crucified, and the rich as being Judas and Cain.<sup>68</sup> This religious awakening in turn paves the way for an apocalyptic identification of London in its present spiritual state with Gomorrah, due to be destroyed by the fires of God's wrath.<sup>69</sup> For Dame Edith's own soul, this vision becomes itself "Gomorrah's fires."<sup>70</sup> It purges her in a final spiritual death, which paves the way for a re-birth to a millennial vision of the regeneration of society to a state of Christian brotherhood. After London has been destroyed for its sins:



. . .the time will come  
 To the heart's dark slum  
 When the rich man's gold and the rich man's wheat  
 Will grow in the street that the starved may eat, --  
 And the sea of the rich will give up its dead --  
 And the last blood and fire from my side will be shed.  
 For the fires of God go marching on.<sup>71</sup>

Thus in Gold Coast Customs Dame Edith, after reaching the "heart of darkness," achieves a personal spiritual re-birth in a vision of a future regeneration of society. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. feels that this vision, strengthened and elaborated during her long poetic silence in the 1930's, was sufficient, for the most part, to sustain her in her poetry in the role of a sage "whose joy of a metaphysical cast transcends the vicissitudes of living in our, or any other age."<sup>72</sup> As we shall see in our next chapter, this statement gives a somewhat distorted picture of Dame Edith's later work. However, it remains true that the vision of social re-birth which she attained in Gold Coast Customs, together with that of a renewal through the passage of time which she achieved in Metamorphosis, form the basis of a joyous vision of existence which constitutes a very prominent element in her later work.

Thus the related themes of the destructiveness of evil and time, and of the state of contemporary society, are treated at some length and in considerable depth in certain of the early poems of Edith Sitwell. We will now proceed to say something of the imagery by which these concerns are given poetic expression. In this connection, we





shall concentrate upon three broad imaginative patterns which are present in the early poetry, and note a few of their concomitant images. This should prove to be a useful preliminary to our consideration of the thematic imagery in Dame Edith's later poetry.

The first of the three imaginative patterns in the earlier poetry which we shall discuss is what may be termed the "Aristotelian" division of terrestrial beings into the categories of the inanimate, the vegetative, the animal, and the human.<sup>73</sup> Dame Edith herself does not see these divisions as being either clear-cut or hermetic. She would emphasize the organic unity of being as strongly as its divisions. Moreover, as we see in the remarkable animating metaphors of her earlier poetry, she apparently tends to see the whole of the material world as a living organism. Being alive, it is also dynamic, and includes within itself both the processes of birth and growth, and those of decay and death. These processes seem at times to be envisioned in Dame Edith's earlier poetry in terms of the Aristotelian notions that the lower terrestrial forms have within themselves at least the potentiality of rising to the higher, and the higher forms contain within themselves the natures of those below them.<sup>74</sup> Thus we sometimes find in her earlier poetry the metamorphosis, or attempted metamorphosis, of lower forms into higher:



. . . the bright plume  
Was once thin grass in shady winter's gloom,

And the furred fire is barking for the shape  
Of hoarse-voiced animals; cold air agape

Whines to be shut in water's shape and plumes;<sup>75</sup>

Conversely, in our study of Metamorphosis, we have noted the opposite process of the descent of man through the destructiveness of time, first to the animal level and finally to the inanimate. As we have seen, this same "fall" is associated in Gold Coast Customs with the immorality of the rich. In the case at least of the descent of man to the ape which we have in these poems, downward metamorphosis would seem to be associated in Dame Edith's mind with atavism in the Darwinian sense. We find further evidence of the influence of Darwin's theories on Dame Edith's vision of metamorphosis in the later poetry.

The poet's sense of the essential oneness of being, and of the way in which one level of existence either potentially or actually incorporates others, explains the numerous animating and de-animating similes and metaphors in the earlier work, as well as the radical images in which the vegetable world is endowed with animal characteristics and vice-versa. It may also be noted in passing that just as Dame Edith sees an organic unity in the external world, so she senses an inner unity of man's perceptive faculties. Thus in Poetry



and Criticism, Dame Edith states that "The modernist poet's brain has become a central sense, interpreting and controlling the other five senses."<sup>76</sup> This statement explains the large number of synæsthetic images in her earlier poetry.<sup>77</sup>

The ascent and descent on the scale of being which we have been discussing are generally, although not always, associated in Dame Edith's imagination with definite spiritual or moral value judgements. Ascent is usually regarded as good and joyous, descent as evil or tragic. Aesthetically, to rise is beautiful, to fall is ugly. We have seen examples of the pejorative associations of descent in the poet's mind in Metamorphosis and Gold Coast Customs. Conversely, we see the beauty, goodness and joy which she attaches to birth and growth in the pastoral world of Elegy on Dead Fashion. Similarly, the regeneration of society envisioned at the end of Gold Coast Customs is figured by images of plant growth.

The concurrence of the two patterns of ascent and descent in Dame Edith's mind seems to lead at times, in her earlier poetry, to the formulation of a cyclical vision of existence. The mud or dust which is the end product of descent down the scale of being is likewise the soil from which the process of ascent begins again. As we have noted, such a cyclical vision is very strongly suggested, in the natural and social spheres respectively, by the endings of Metamor-





phosis and Gold Coast Customs; and we likewise have hints at such a view of the processes of nature in Elegy on Dead Fashion.<sup>78</sup>

The connection of this cyclical vision with the diurnal and seasonal rhythms which we find in some of the imagery of Dame Edith's earlier poetry is, of course, in accord with both everyday experience and a long poetic tradition. However, Dame Edith has acknowledged an acquaintance with the writings of Sir James Frazer and his followers,<sup>79</sup> and this school likewise exerted a strong influence over other writers of the twenties such as Eliot and Lawrence. We should, therefore, try to form some estimate of the influence of the Cambridge anthropologists upon the cyclical vision of existence which we seem to see in the process of formation in Dame Edith's earlier poetry. To aid us in this regard, we have at hand John B. Vickery's excellent article, "The Golden Bough and Modern Poetry."

Vickery notes that "Part of the reason for Frazer's tremendous influence on modern literature is that his work constitutes a fertile matrix and mirror of ideas, observations, beliefs and images central to the age."<sup>80</sup> This influence he sees as being twofold. On the one hand he stresses the negative "concentration upon the concepts of sex, superstition and survival"<sup>81</sup> in both The Golden Bough and the age itself:



. . .from the turn of the twentieth century on. . .the concern with man's sexual impulses and their relation to the rest of his life was articulated with increasing intensity. And though it was Freud, Jung and the other psychoanalysts who spearheaded this trend, Frazer too was intrigued by the way in which 'the sexual instinct has moulded the religious consciousness of our race'. . .The Golden Bough also reflected the psychological concern with levels of consciousness and the mysterious workings of the human mind by its examples of prophetic foresight, shamanistic trances, mass psychology and the denial of common-sense categories of thought. For Frazer these habits of thought revealed the functional, pragmatic and superstitious character of institutions as diverse as those of religion, government, private property, and marriage.

Frazer dramatized, too, the struggle for survival propounded in the Victorian age, and enacted in the early years of the twentieth century. For primitive man, this struggle is essentially twofold in character. On the one hand, it consists in resisting the attacks made by rival tribes and nations. . . . On the other hand, there is the constant threat of attrition, the attack from within one's borders by drought and starvation, which is synonymous with the people's enemy. Thus, man and the land are the twin foci of these complementary and unceasing battles.<sup>82</sup>

The possible influence of this pessimistic concern of Frazer with sex, superstition and survival upon the negative aspect of the cyclical vision which we seem to see forming in Dame Edith's earlier poetry is obviously very great. In The Hambone and the Heart and Gold Coast Customs, we see the importance in the poet's mind as a factor in human evil of the destructive potential of man's sexual impulses. We have a striking example of the workings of the primitive mind, with its susceptibility to trance, its mass psychology and its denial of reason, in the cannibalistic rites of Lady Bambergher's parties. Thus, in attempting to convey the spirit of their frenzy in Gold Coast





Customs, Dame Edith deliberately employs hypnotic rhythms suggestive of the mesmeric dances and accompaniments of primitive rituals, and imagery which flagrantly denies "common-sense categories of thought." In Gold Coast Customs we likewise seem to see a "civilized" parody of the struggle for survival in which tribal war is replaced by what amounts to a class war, and the natural threat of attrition for a whole people has its counterpart in an artificial situation in which the poor are starved by the heartlessness of the rich.

Vickery sums up his assessment of the influence of the negative side of Frazer's thought upon his contemporaries by stating that The Golden Bough suggested to them that "the primitive savage was still deeply ingrained in modern man, and posed a serious threat to civilization itself. In view of this crisis, founded upon the revelation of the irrational character of much of human life, there was, it was felt, an imperative need for an overhauling of man's convictions concerning culture, society and the individual."<sup>83</sup> It should be obvious from our study of Gold Coast Customs that just such convictions as those which Vickery documents in his summation are central to the poem's meaning. Accordingly, we have good reason to suppose that Frazer might have exerted a strong influence in the formation of Dame Edith's vision of the degeneration of man through his own evil



impulses.

Vickery goes on to argue that Frazer's work was not merely a negative factor in the intellectual life of the early twentieth century:

At the same time as Frazer was apparently documenting these negative convictions, he was also proving himself one of the foremost contributors to his generation's newly awakened sense of the continuity and intelligibility of human life which is created and preserved in the face of anarchy, chaos and disorder. In organizing the plethora of anthropological material under the controlling concept of the dying and reviving fertility deity, Frazer illustrated both the rational powers of man, which his researches had seemed to deny, and the religious character of man's salvation, which his personal inclinations had led him to reject.

In relation to its age. . . The Golden Bough thus embraces two pairs of antithetical concepts. It presents not only the irrational and unstable character of human life, but also its order and stability. On vegetative, sexual, psychological, social and cultural levels alike it sees fertility and sterility as succeeding one another in a systolic and diastolic universal rhythm.<sup>84</sup>

Thus in The Golden Bough Frazer gave his generation a double vision of the disruptive forces in human life on the one hand, and of the religious and rational factors making for man's salvation on the other. His work likewise embodied a vision of these and other elements in human life succeeding each other in a cyclical pattern of birth, growth, decay, death and re-birth.

The possibility of an influence of these conceptions on Dame Edith's earlier poetry should be evident. On the one hand, in the early work, we have seen an awareness of the destructive and disruptive fac-





tors in human life which culminates in the poet's spiritual disintegration and death in Gold Coast Customs. On the other, we have in that poem and in Metamorphosis a personal spiritual re-birth which results ultimately from the achievement of the religious sensibility which Frazer's work showed as giving continuity and stability to primitive life. Similarly, in Gold Coast Customs, Dame Edith envisions the re-birth of society as a whole to a state of Christian brotherhood. Thus, in accordance with the implications of Frazer's work, we seem to see in Dame Edith's early poetry the operation on both a personal and a social level of a cyclical process of death and re-birth. In Metamorphosis and Elegy on Dead Fashion, we likewise have suggested a cyclical vision of the processes of nature which calls to mind Frazer's discussion of primitive religion in The Golden Bough.

Vickery notes that the influence of Frazer on the writers of his age extended beyond his presentation to them of the concepts which we have been discussing. He quotes J. H. Buckley's comment that The Golden Bough provided "an almost inexhaustible source book for the central myth and symbols of a twentieth century literature."<sup>85</sup> In particular the concentration of Frazer on the seasonal cycle of course suggested to the writers of his day a body of symbols for the expression of the cyclical vision of existence which was embodied in his work, and likewise already deeply rooted in literary tradition.





Thus we may perhaps see the influence of the Cambridge anthropologists in those passages in Elegy on Dead Fashion, Metamorphosis, Gold Coast Customs and others of the early poems in which seasonal imagery is used to describe Dame Edith's own personal state or that of humanity as a whole. To quote two examples which we have mentioned before, her most extensive description of the golden age of man in Elegy on Dead Fashion follows the upturn of the seasonal cycle from early spring to summer, and the regeneration of society at the end of Gold Coast Customs is figured by the growth of wheat.<sup>86</sup> Thus, with regard to both its imagery and its general conception, the cyclical vision of existence which we seem to see forming in Dame Edith's earlier poetry may very well owe a great deal to the work of Frazer and his followers. We shall accordingly speak of the "Frazerian" cycle of life and death as a second major imaginative pattern in Dame Edith's earlier poetry.

As we have noted above, Dame Edith's working out of at least the rudiments of a cyclical vision of existence in Metamorphosis and Gold Coast Customs is in both cases the result of a religious experience. In the latter poem this experience takes the form of envisioning the state of contemporary society in terms of the events of Biblical narrative. The pattern of Biblical history thus begins to emerge at the end of Dame Edith's early period as a third major imaginative



pattern in her poetry.

The use of this pattern in Gold Coast Customs is both explicit and implicit. As we have seen, the rich are identified in the poem with Judas and Cain, the poor with Christ crucified, and London and its spiritual state with Gomorrah. There likewise seems to be a good deal of implicit use of the passages of the Revelation to John which describe the Great Whore of Babylon and her destruction by the wrath of God to make way for the New Jerusalem.<sup>87</sup> We can, for example, draw a parallel between the poor in Gold Coast Customs and the slain martyrs of the Revelation to John,<sup>88</sup> between the figure of Lady Bambergher and that of the Great Whore, and between London and the demonic city of Babylon. The use of Biblical history by Dame Edith in Gold Coast Customs paves the way for the development of an essentially Christian vision of a cycle of innocence, fall and redemption in the later poetry.

To conclude our discussion in Dame Edith's earlier poetry of the three patterns of ascent and descent through the "Aristotelian" categories, the "Frazerian" cycle of life and death and Biblical history, we should stress their close imaginative relationship to one another. The cyclical vision which we have seen emerging in her early poetry really consists of the fusing together of the processes of ascent and descent into an organic whole. The Biblical pattern of history as we see it in





Gold Coast Customs is itself a cycle of death and re-birth. The essential unity of the three patterns discussed above accounts, as we shall see, for a good deal of the richness and suggestiveness of Dame Edith's later poetry.



## CHAPTER II

### THREE NEGATIVE THEMES IN THE LATER POETRY OF DAME EDITH SITWELL, AND THEIR CONCOMITANT IMAGERY

Dame Edith, as Ralph J. Mills, Jr. notes in his article, "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," had already begun to see her way beyond the "heart of darkness" in Gold Coast Customs.<sup>1</sup> Mills sees a fundamental difference between her artistic role in this piece and that in the work published after her long poetic silence during the 1930's. From the role of judge of her society and its practises, he believes she advanced to that of the wise old woman prophet in which "the judge's role is, for the most part, assimilated to that of the sage, whose joy of a metaphysical cast transcends the vicissitudes of living in our, or any other time."<sup>2</sup> He thinks that in this later phase of Dame Edith's poetic career, the negative aspects of her vision are, on the whole, assimilated by the positive:

Dame Edith, while she assuredly recognizes evil as it erupts constantly in human desires and actions, seldom touches on such matters as original sin, human guilt and damnation as permanent threats to man. It would almost seem as if the poet had played her role of judge and Jeremiah for the last time in "Gold Coast Customs" though, to be sure, some of the war poems, the pieces on the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki - "Dirge for a New Sunrise" [sic] - and a few others, such as "Street Acrobat" and "The Shadow of Cain" contain a highly critical valuation of man and the destructive waste he has called down on himself. But, in general, moral defection appears as a less significant part of a much greater plan which absorbs evil in fulfilling its appointed destiny. Dame Edith's charac-



terization of herself as the "Old Woman," a prophet and poet who has learned the secrets of the living and the dead, who enjoys a knowledge of the hidden operations and spiritual resources of the universe, places her in a position to survey the past, look forward into the future, and yet be, in a sense, beyond both by the nature of this role and the wisdom assigned it. She sees all things now as the signs of renewal, indeed at moments, of the Day of Resurrection.<sup>3</sup>

It shall, it is hoped, be shown in this chapter that these comments do not give a true picture of Dame Edith's later poetry. There is certainly no question that the positive aspects of her vision are greatly strengthened and developed in her later work. On the whole they do perhaps predominate. However, a reading of the later poetry will show a very large number of individual poems in which a tragic awareness of human evil as expressed in contemporary events and social conditions, of the spiritual and physical decay of the individual through time, and of the destructiveness of erotic passion is unbalanced by any positive conclusions. Moreover, in almost all of the rest of Dame Edith's later pieces, these tragedies exist as factors to be reckoned with in her vision of the ultimate beauty and goodness of the universe. In other words, the poet by no means entirely left behind in her later work the spiritual difficulties with which we saw her wrestling in the early poetry. Far from always being in her mature period, the more or less detached sage whose vision enables her to transcend the negative aspects of existence, she often con-





fronts us in her later poetry with pieces in which she still plays the role of "judge and Jeremiah," and likewise with passages in which she displays the most intense spiritual agony:

Bound to my heart as Ixion to the wheel,  
Nailed to my heart as the Thief upon the Cross,  
I hang between our Christ, and the gap where the world was lost<sup>4</sup>

Such lines as these may or may not be reconcilable with the many passages in her later poetry with which Mills' remarks are perfectly consonant. However, they do have the beauty of showing a heart and mind exquisitely alive to a far greater range of experience than that for which Mills' remarks would give them credit. Accordingly, in this chapter, we shall attempt first of all to modify his contentions by an examination in Dame Edith's later poetry of the negative themes which we have just mentioned, beginning with the poet's vision of human evil as it is expressed in contemporary events and social conditions.

Some of the most powerful of Dame Edith's later pieces are those written in horrified reaction to specific events in the history of the mid-twentieth century, such as the London blitz, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the suffering caused by the Korean War.<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to realize that Dame Edith does not see these specific catastrophes as isolated and inexplicable events. Rather, she envisions them as growing out of



a cultural disease which she sees in turn as being the result of a long historical process. Accordingly, a knowledge of Dame Edith's vision of the sickness of contemporary civilization and of its roots in human history forms an essential background for the understanding of such poems as Still Falls the Rain and Dirge for the New Sunrise. The subject likewise forms in itself an important theme in Dame Edith's later poetry. We shall, therefore, now give it a detailed consideration.

As she did in Elegy on Dead Fashion, Dame Edith in her mature work sees the state of contemporary civilization as the product of a long spiritual decline. This process is seen in the later poetry as the downturn of a historical cycle of death and re-birth, upon which the over-all pattern of Biblical narrative is superimposed to form a mytho-historic vision of human progression. This myth begins with the fall of Adam and Eve. Thus in The Two Loves we are told that:

The earth, the sun, the heart, have so many fires  
 It is a great wonder  
 That the whole world is not consumed. In such a  
 heat of the earth, under  
 The red bough, the Colossus of rubies the first  
 husbandman and grave-digger, the red Adam,  
 Dug from the earth of his own nature, the corn effigy  
 Of a long-buried country god, encrusted with earth-virtues  
 And brought to a new birth  
 The ancient wisdom hiding behind heat and laughter,  
 Deep-rooted in Death's earth.<sup>6</sup>





Thus, after a first fall of man into mortality, Dame Edith sees him as being re-born to a new pastoral wisdom and goodness by his communion with a Divine Force of life still working in his mortal body and in nature. That is, he enters the golden age of Elegy on Dead Fashion. To judge from the vision of the wise old sages of others among the later poems,<sup>7</sup> the newly fallen Adam had the penetration to see the time in which he had become involved as a cyclical process, in which decay and death were only an inevitable preparation for rebirth and fresh growth. Most important of all, he presumably came to regard both man and nature as holy.

Dame Edith apparently sees man as having undergone a further fall, which is described by her in some remarks concerning The Shadow of Cain:

This poem is about the fission of the world into warring particles, destroying and self-destructive. It is about that gradual migration of mankind, after that Second Fall of Man that took the form of the separation of brother and brother, of Cain and Abel, of nation and nation, of the rich and the poor--the spiritual migration of these into the desert of the Cold, towards the final disaster, the first symbol of which fell on Hiroshima.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the "ultimate cold within the heart of Man,"<sup>9</sup> the evil which was perhaps an inheritance of the first fall, destroyed the state of pastoral wisdom and goodness which Adam had achieved. His recognition of the holiness of all life, and of the consequent brotherhood of humanity, fell before Cain's murder of Abel, which for Dame Edith



is a symbolic type of the hatred, violence and divisions among men which have resulted in history from human evil.

The spiritual history of humanity from this point onward is described by Dame Edith in The Shadow of Cain. After the murder of Abel, man was split into the "destroying and self-destructive" units referred to above, and he migrated symbolically into the "desert" of his own spiritual cold or evil. He finally reached the "city of Cain."<sup>10</sup> This city is, for Dame Edith, a type of the division, isolation, privation, murder, lust, sterility and other evils of the life of modern urban and industrial society, as opposed to the pastoral wisdom and goodness of Adam. Despite the state into which man fell in the city of Cain, he seemed at first to be re-born spiritually in his confrontation with the three primal realities of life: Bread, Struggle and Death.<sup>11</sup> However, the brotherhood of the city of Cain was a false brotherhood, hiding man's fundamental division by his own evil impulses. His short spring of spiritual re-birth and growth was soon halted by the atrocities of world war, which reached their culmination in the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima:

We did not heed the Cloud in the Heavens shaped like  
the hand  
Of man. . . . But there came a roar as if the Sun and  
Earth had come together. --  
The Sun descending and the Earth ascending  
To take its place above. . . the Primal Matter  
Was broken, the womb from which all life began.  
Then to the murdered Sun a totem pole of dust arose  
in memory of Man.<sup>12</sup>





This catastrophe finally shattered the false sense of brotherhood between the inhabitants of the city of Cain. The most fundamental cleavage of the modern world, that of the rich from the poor, was revealed by the dropping of the bomb in all of its spiritual horror.<sup>13</sup> As Dame Edith's treatment of this split in The Shadow of Cain needs some supplementary explanation in order to be fully understood, we will leave our discussion of her historical myth in that poem for a moment in order to examine her view, in the later poetry, of economic conditions in modern society.

In the introductory remarks to her Collected Poems, we discover that Dame Edith regards the social conditions which were depicted in Gold Coast Customs as being directly responsible for the catastrophes of the Second World War, and the poem as being a prophecy of these disasters.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, we find in her later work a strong vein of condemnation of "the change from the worship of the holy, living, life-giving gold of the wheat to the destructive gold of Dives--the change from the warmth that makes all men brothers to the state in which men only call their fellow man 'Brother' in order to act the part of Cain."<sup>15</sup>

The ideas recorded in this passage are treated in particularly great detail in the later poetry in The Song of the Gold. In this poem Dame Edith sees the spiritual state of contemporary society





as having worsened from the corruption of the twenties to an almost azoic spiritual sterility. It is accordingly no longer represented by the feverish, mud-daubed savagery of African cannibal tribes, but by the even more terrible image of a lifeless polar world of ice.<sup>16</sup> In this cold world man is divided into the "two opposing brotherhoods" of the rich and the poor who are figured by the Dives and Lazarus of Christ's parable respectively. As in Gold Coast Customs, the poor are represented as being the innocent victims of the heartlessness and rapacity of the rich.<sup>17</sup> They have been reduced to a physical death in life by the privations of poverty. This, together with their consequent isolation, in turn has caused their spiritual death as human beings. They have been reduced by want to animals, and their love can now only assume perverted forms.<sup>18</sup>

The physical and spiritual state of the rich is seen in The Song of the Cold as being so appalling that it is presented in the poem as meriting pity rather than condemnation; even the pity of Lazarus. The poor are at least alive enough to be degraded, but the bodies and souls of the rich have so decayed in their false worship of gold as to be almost entirely without life. Their only sign of vitality seems to be a self-devouring, animal hunger.<sup>19</sup>



In The Song of the Cold, the only brotherhood which Dives and Lazarus find is that of their impending death in "The ultimate cold within the heart of Man."<sup>20</sup> Returning now to the point at which we left The Shadow of Cain, we find the same symbolic figures of Dives and Lazarus in much the same plight as that which was described in The Song of the Cold. The figure of Lazarus has, according to Dame Edith, a double significance in The Shadow of Cain.<sup>21</sup> First, he is "the poor man, the maker of bread who is also the living wheat."<sup>22</sup> That is, he is a type of Christ as He appears in the Divine forces of life behind "the holy, life-giving gold of the wheat," and also in the sacramental blend of the spiritual and the physical in the "heart" of man. However, the breaking of the "Primal Matter," "the womb from which all life began," has blighted the wheat and slain man's heart.<sup>23</sup> Lazarus accordingly seems to become, in The Shadow of Cain, a type of Christ in the sepulchre. He is, however, incapable of resurrection, and is silent before the "mained of life" who come to his tomb seeking salvation.<sup>24</sup>

The other meaning which the symbol of Lazarus is intended to convey in The Shadow of Cain is that

of Poverty, now moved into a tomb of useless gold, in which, until the fires of love and spiritual re-birth reach him, he will lie as dead as in his tomb of mud. Lazarus, the symbol of the new earthly resurrection of Man, that cold idealists believe is to be brought about by the new experiments. Lazarus, the terrible ideal of useless Suffering, Lazarus, the hero of death and the mud, taking the





place in men's minds of the Hero of Life Who was born in a stable.<sup>25</sup>

This attack in The Shadow of Cain on the proposals and attempts of the twentieth century to bring about a merely physical resurrection of man by means of science and technology, occurs again and again in Dame Edith's later poetry.<sup>26</sup> It is presumably based upon the fact that the "cold idealists," founding their solutions upon reason, the scientific method and technology, neglect the essential facts that the forces of life and re-birth in man and nature are in essence spiritual, and that the universe is ultimately organic rather than mechanical. Accordingly, their schemes are seen, in several of the later poems, as resulting merely in a systematization of the hunger and death which they are ostensibly fighting:

The pulse that beats in the heart is changed to the  
hammer  
That sounds in the Potter's Field where they build  
a new world  
From our Bone, and the carrion-bird days' foul  
droppings and clamour -<sup>27</sup>

In The Shadow of Cain Lazarus, the hero of the "cold idealists," is merely moved by their efforts from his "tomb of mud" to a "tomb of useless gold" which represents a purely material prosperity. There he lies, spiritually dead, unable to say a word to the diseased of modern civilization who come to beg him for salvation.



In The Shadow of Cain, then, Dame Edith sees no hope for the modern world from the poor man, and neither does she expect any solution to its problems from the rich. After Lazarus has been consulted in vain by the "maimed of life," they bring Dives. However, he suffers from the same leprosy of materialism as the dead Lazarus, and he is so physically and spiritually decayed that he lacks even the self-consuming hunger of "the miser Foscue" in The Song of the Cold.<sup>28</sup>

You would not know him now from Lazarus!<sup>29</sup>

All that Dives can recommend as a substitute for the vitality of soul and body that has been destroyed by social evils and by war is an intensification of the materialism that has brought about the tragedies of the contemporary world in the first place. Like the "cold idealists," he has the presumption to maintain that material wealth alone will cure the sickness of civilization.<sup>30</sup> But he is accused by "an unborn wheat-ear," a symbol of the Divine force of life in man and in nature, which has been threatened or destroyed by the atomic bomb:

. . . 'You are the shadow of Cain, Your shade is the primal Hunger.'<sup>31</sup>

Thus the materialism of the rich is seen in The Shadow of Cain as not merely sterile. As in Gold Coast Customs, it is regarded as also being an expression of "the ultimate cold" of the evil within the heart of man. In worshipping "Brute gold," Dives not only destroys himself, but also his fellow human beings. His idolatry is accordingly





envisioned in The Shadow of Cain as being one with the evil active throughout Biblical history in such events as Adam's fall, Cain's murder of Abel, the wickedness of Sodom and the betrayal of Christ by Judas.<sup>32</sup> All of these events are ultimately one and the same thing: the violation of the Divine Force of life and goodness which is active in man and in nature. Thus, although the main Biblical type of the social cannibalism of the rich in The Shadow of Cain is the murder of Abel, it is likewise seen in that poem, as in Gold Coast Customs, as being the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ. The poor, even in their present degraded state, are the "torn and particoloured garments of Christ;" and the rich man is consequently a Judas.<sup>33</sup>

The Shadow of Cain ends with an apocalyptic vision of God's judgement of the modern world and of the Second Coming of Christ. The materialism of the rich which, through the destruction of their brother men, makes them one with Cain and Judas, will ultimately bring damnation upon them.<sup>34</sup> Dame Edith's vision of the sins and damnation of Dives is counterbalanced in her poem by that of the Second Coming when Christ, triumphant over the forces of evil and death, will come to redeem the victims of social injustice and war.<sup>35</sup> It is with these events that the historical cycle of death and re-birth, fall and redemption, is brought to a conclusion.





Thus, in The Shadow of Cain, Dame Edith sees the Divine Force within creation, which underlies the normal processes of nature and human life, as being either destroyed or rendered inactive by "The ultimate cold within the heart of Man." To help her face this spiritual crisis, however, she has the Christian vision of the Second Coming and Judgement, in which good and evil will meet their respective destinies according to God's plan. In The Shadow of Cain this apocalyptic vision is in turn part of a larger mytho-historic scheme in which Biblical typology and chronology are used to give symbolic expression to the poet's beliefs concerning the causes, effects and results of the present state of the world. This pattern of fall and redemption is, of course, cyclical, and it is connected with the cycles of nature by the fact that it is a manifestation of the same Divine Force of life and goodness. These correspondences which Dame Edith sees between the orders of nature and revelation are, as we shall see, clearly manifested in the imagery of some of her later poems.

We are now ready to undertake a cursory examination of some of the poems written in reaction to specific events of twentieth century history. Still Falls the Rain, inspired by the air raids of 1940, is like The Shadow of Cain in being a poem about the horrors of war, and the spiritual state of the world which is responsible for them.



Dame Edith's vision of contemporary conditions in this poem is essentially that outlined above, so we need not pause to discuss it here. What is important for us to notice about the poem is the vision of the state of the contemporary world as a historical continuation of Christ's Passion; and the poet's use of the image of rain. Rain functions, at the beginning of the poem, only as a symbol of the terrible destruction wrought by the Blitz.<sup>36</sup> Then, identified with Christ's blood, it becomes first a symbol of His historical Passion, and finally of His redemptive love for man.<sup>37</sup>

Dame Edith's reaction to the horrors of the Second World War apparently reached a peak of intensity with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Her spiritual agony over this event finds magnificent poetic expression in Three Poems of the Atomic Age. It should be emphasized at the outset that the three must be read as a unit if their full significance is to be appreciated. In the first of these pieces, Dirge for the New Sunrise, Dame Edith sees "the world's weight of the world's filth, / And the filth in the heart of Man"<sup>38</sup> as being responsible for the terrible catastrophe by which the very Deity in man and in nature has been either destroyed or paralyzed. In this poem she finds no hope for mankind,<sup>39</sup> and she likens herself to the "Thief upon the Cross." She belongs neither to Christ nor to the lost world, but hangs in spiritual torment be-





tween the two.<sup>40</sup>

The second of the three poems, The Shadow of Cain, has already been analyzed in some detail. It will therefore be sufficient for our purposes to reiterate here that Dame Edith, in this piece, has recovered sufficiently from her shock to fit the dropping of the atomic bomb into a specifically Christian vision of history, ending in the damnation of evil according to God's Judgement, and the redemption of the victimized by the Second Coming of Christ. Finally, in The Canticle of the Rose, the poet sees the cycles of nature as being not utterly destroyed, but remaining to bear witness to the termination of the cycle of Biblical history, when the fire of Christ's redemptive love shall "burn away the cold in the heart of Man."<sup>41</sup> The correspondences which Dame Edith sees between the two cycles have been mentioned above and need not be reiterated here. It will be sufficient to note that they make possible the use of the rose as a symbolic witness in the life of nature to Christ and His Second Coming.<sup>42</sup> Thus the Three Poems of the Atomic Age begin with Dame Edith in despair at the destruction wrought by human evil, and end with a joyous vision of the continuation of "the fires of God" in nature and in human history.

From even our brief study of the Three Poems of the Atomic Age, it should be evident that Mills was not really correct in assert-



ing that Dame Edith was well past the "heart of darkness" by the time that her later poems were written. An impartial reading of Gold Coast Customs and Dirge for the New Sunrise will, I believe, show that Dame Edith found the dropping of the atomic bomb as terrible as the conditions accompanying the onset of the Great Depression. And, even though she was once again capable of asserting her faith in "the fires of God" in the face of human evil, her anxiety at the state of the world was by no means entirely allayed. She herself states, in connection with The Shadow of Cain, that "After that poem, haunted ever by the shadow that fell on Hiroshima, I yet 'blessed Jesus Christ with his people.'" <sup>43</sup> This statement, with its pessimistic implications, is corroborated by the evidence of such later poems as Butterfly Weather, The Blinded Song-Bird near the Battlefield and The War Orphans.

Mills' statements likewise fail to take sufficient account of the frequent laments in the later poetry over the physical and spiritual destruction of the individual by time. This theme, it will be remembered, was expressed in Dame Edith's earlier poetry in terms of the torment suffered by love through time and death, and this is also true of many of the later poems. Although the treatment of this negative concern in Dame Edith's mature work is essentially the same as it was in the poems which we discussed in Chapter I,



a few comments may nonetheless be made in passing.

In the first place, we encounter more than once in the later poetry the Christian view of mortality as a condition of man's fallen nature. Thus Adam is referred to in The Two Loves as the first grave-digger.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the worm in Bagatelle, which functions as a symbol of man's mortality, states "'My redness is from Adam.'" <sup>45</sup> Eve, in Song: Where is all the bright company gone, laments the temptation and fall which has brought death on mankind and on herself.<sup>46</sup> This mortality which the fall of man has entailed is represented in a number of the later poems as causing both a physical and a spiritual decay in old age. Thus, in The Poet Laments the Coming of Old Age, Dame Edith tells us that not only has she gained neither wisdom nor goodness, but she has even lost the "seed of Folly" which could reconcile her to physical and spiritual decay.<sup>47</sup> The continuity of the poet's thought on the subject of mortality from her earlier work is indicated by her inclusion of a number of pertinent lines from Metamorphosis in Lo, this is she that was the world's desire.<sup>48</sup>

Dame Edith's vision of the destructiveness of time sometimes extends in her later poetry to embrace the whole of creation. Thus, in the opening lines of Green Song, the new life of spring is envisioned as lying under the shadow of a portentous fate.<sup>49</sup> Just as Eve, the





great mother of all mankind, is seen as having bequeathed her mortality to all of her children; so the earth, represented in An Old Woman and other poems, as a mother,<sup>50</sup> transmits the seeds of decay and death to all material beings. If Dame Edith sees any connection between the fallen state of man and the mortality which exists in nature, it does not seem to be explicitly stated in her later poetry.

Thus, although the emphasis is undoubtedly on re-birth and growth in Dame Edith's later poetry as a whole, the tragic sense of the destructiveness of time which we found in her earlier work continues to be present. In a number of individual pieces the painfulness of this vision is not mitigated by the consoling awareness of re-birth and continuing vitality which we find in many of the later poems. It is no detached sage, "whose joy of a metaphysical cast transcends the vicissitudes of living in our, or any other, time," that we see in such pieces as The Poet Laments the Coming of Old Age, O Bitter Love, O Death, Lo, this is she that was the world's desire and The Night Wind.

There is yet another aspect of Dame Edith's later poetry with which Mills' remarks do not square. This is the way in which she sometimes see the vitality of youth, as expressed in erotic passion, as being chaotic and destructive and, consequently, one of the principal factors in the decay of the individual in time. The fulfillment



of the life force on all levels of being is consistently represented by Dame Edith in her later work as a violent process, images of burning and storm occurring again and again in this connection.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, young life in its vitality is represented repeatedly as being heedless of evil or of the passage of time.<sup>52</sup>

Generally, the violence of upsurging life is seen in the later poetry as good and beautiful, and its dauntlessness is regarded as a sign of innocence and of a faith in the forces of vitality which is, for Dame Edith, true wisdom. However, at times, the turbulence manifested in erotic passion is envisioned as chaotic and destructive, and the heedlessness of youth is seen as a tragic blindness which brings down destruction upon its head. Thus, in the Song: Once my heart was a summer rose, the carefree attitude of a young girl is seen as frivolity,<sup>53</sup> and the rose of her heart is withered by the scorching sun of that of her lover.<sup>54</sup> The same themes are also treated in Heart and Mind and Dido's Song.

In Green Flows the River of Lethe - O, the chaotic violence which sometimes accompanies sexual love seems to be envisioned as part and parcel of man's fallen condition. In this truly apocalyptic poem, erotic passion is seen as being both self-destructive and evil. The heart of the young girl who narrates the poem becomes Gomorrah, and her own emotion the fire which, destroying it, leaves only oblivion.<sup>55</sup>





The parallel here with the imagery used by Dame Edith in connection with social evils in Gold Coast Customs suggests that she regards the heat of erotic passion as being sometimes closely analogous to, if not identical with, "The ultimate cold within the heart of Man." Similarly, in the lyric At Cockcrow, sexual love is seen as being one with the sins of the world;<sup>56</sup> while in Mary Stuart to James Bothwell. . ., Mary's terrible amorality in love seems to make her another Cain.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, in Dame Edith's vision of the destructiveness of erotic passion, we have a third recurring theme in the later poetry for which Mills' statements do not make sufficient allowance. We are now in a position to contradict a number of his specific assertions. In the first place, it is evident that in her later poetry, Dame Edith very often does regard "original sin, human guilt and damnation" as permanent threats to man until creation shall be restored by the Second Coming of Christ and the Judgement Day. Far from always seeing "in all things. . . the signs of renewal, indeed, at moments of the Day of Resurrection," she often envisions a positive force of evil in the universe which will inevitably draw down God's condemnation upon itself. Accordingly, we do see Dame Edith more than once, after Gold Coast Customs, playing the role of "judge and Jeremiah." Far from always being a more or less detached sage, she often suf-



fers acute spiritual torment through her vision of a world in which evil, decay and death are all factors to be reckoned with. Thus while there are a large number of poems in the canon of Dame Edith's later work, to which Mills' statements would seem to apply, there are also others which seem directly to contradict them. These simply must be taken into account if a balanced view of the poet's mature work is to be achieved.

We have, then, established the existence of a vital concern in Dame Edith's later poetry with the themes of human evil as expressed in contemporary history, the physical and spiritual decay of the individual through time, and the destructiveness of erotic passion. We may now proceed to discuss the images by which these concerns are given poetic expression. An examination of the later poems suggests that the three great imaginative patterns which we found in Dame Edith's earlier work likewise provide a matrix which determines the choice and organization of images in the mature pieces. In most of the later poems we find two or more of these patterns either juxtaposed or superimposed one upon another. The skilful way in which they are blended in the later work seems to me to constitute no small part of Dame Edith's achievement.

Let us first examine, in her later poetry, the prominent pattern of a descent down the "Aristotelian" scale of being due to the forces of



evil and destruction at work in the universe. This pattern seems to owe its rich significance in the later poems to at least four sources. In the first place, of course, it corresponds to the downturn of the "Frazerian" cycle of death and life, a fact which will be discussed below in more detail. Secondly, there are certain cases in which descent obviously corresponds to atavism in the Darwinian sense. Thirdly, it may perhaps represent, in Dame Edith's later poetry, a degeneration in the context of the Aristotelian notion of a teleological ascent of being through a hierarchy of matter and form in emulation of a perfect Divinity.<sup>58</sup> Finally, the cyclical, evolutionary and teleological aspects of descent would seem to derive spiritual significance from a visionary Christianity which sees them as factors in the Divine plan by which the forces of good and evil work out their destinies in man and in nature. It will be seen, then, that the pattern of descent through the levels of being exists in the later poetry in an organic relationship with the other two patterns which we have discussed, and derives some of its significance from them.

Let us now examine the imagery by which Dame Edith gives poetic expression, in the later work, to her vision of a descent through the categories of being. In the pieces dealing with the human evil expressed in contemporary history, we find a number of instances





of such a fall in the imagery in which man is represented as degenerating into various animal forms. Thus the poor are described over and over again, in Dame Edith's later poetry, as having fallen to the level of the ape and the tiger.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, the miser Foscue is figured in The Song of the Cold as a lion in his self-devouring avarice.<sup>60</sup> But there are even lower animal forms which contemporary man assumes on his way to the dust. The pettiness of the fears and ambitions of modern civilization is consistently represented, in the later poetry, by insect images such as the fly, the gnat, the ant, and the spider.<sup>61</sup> Even lower than man's pettiness is his greed, "that worm with the brow of Cain."<sup>62</sup>

There is at least one suggestion of a degeneration of contemporary man to the vegetative level in Dame Edith's later poems.<sup>63</sup> However, a much greater importance is assumed in this regard by images of the inanimate. In The Song of the Cold, and other poems, the plight of the poor is driven home by representing them as bundles of rag.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, in The Song of the Cold, Foscue is represented as having turned to gold in his spiritual and physical degeneration.<sup>65</sup> Gem and stone imagery is also frequently used by Dame Edith in connection with the state of contemporary civilization.<sup>66</sup> The mud of Gold Coast Customs plays a much less important role in the later poems. As we have noted, Dame Edith sees the state of the world as



having worsened from corruption to a terrible sterility, and she uses the images of ice or dust far more frequently than that of slime to describe it.<sup>67</sup>

Another group of images associated, by the poet, with modern man's descent down the ladder of being are the heart, the skeleton, and the shadow. The heart, the symbol of the sacramental union of the spiritual and the physical in human nature, is represented in a number of poems as having disappeared or as being in grave danger.<sup>68</sup> Without his heart, nothing is really left to man but his skeleton, the symbol of the lifelessness to which his fallen flesh is bound to descend;<sup>69</sup> or his shadow, which is suggestive of his ultimate insubstantiality when reduced to a purely material level.<sup>70</sup>

The symbolic pattern of descent through the levels of being is also used by Dame Edith to give expression to her vision of the spiritual and physical decay of the individual through time. The images employed in connection with this process are often identical with those which figure man's degeneration through evil, and this suggests Dame Edith's sense of their common origin in his fallen nature and of their closely analagous character. Thus we once again have the fall of man to the level of the ape, the lion and the tiger in the description of the aged Venus in Lo, this is she that was the world's desire.<sup>71</sup> The worm, which is associated with human evil in Gold Coast Customs





and Still Falls the Rain, is used even more frequently in connection with man's decay through time.<sup>72</sup> In this connection it is, of course, associated with his inevitable death and physical dissolution. Like the poor, the dead are also represented as being reduced to lifeless rag and bone. Finally, they decay into earth or crumble into dust.<sup>73</sup>

We likewise see a descent of man to levels below the human through the violence and destructiveness of erotic passion in Dame Edith's later poetry. The symbol of the lion is particularly prominent in this connection. The lion is an ambiguous beast in Dame Edith's mature work, sometimes symbolizing the constructive vitality of life, and sometimes standing for its potential for destructive and self-consuming violence. It has the latter meaning in such poems as Green Flows the River of Lethe - O, and Heart and Mind.<sup>74</sup> The carnivorous ferocity of sexual love is also symbolized, in Dido's Song, by the dog.<sup>75</sup> At the conclusion of Green Flows the River of Lethe - O, we find the quiet growth of grass and clover, and the flowing of the waters of oblivion, where the Gomorrah of the heart was destroyed by passion.<sup>76</sup> In still other poems, the lover is represented as being reduced to lifeless bone.<sup>77</sup>

It should be noticed in passing that the imagery used by Dame Edith to express man's fall through erotic passion overlaps with that which figures the destruction of his humanity by evil and the passage



of time. This suggests that the poet envisions a common origin for these tragedies, presumably in the fact of man's fallen nature. The three likewise seem to be regarded by her as taking a common course in the lowering of man through the various levels of being to a termination in the inanimate.

As we have noted above, the degeneration of man through evil, time, and erotic passion, corresponds to the downturn of the "Frazerian" cycle of life and death. This latter pattern is extremely prominent in Dame Edith's later poetry. Thus the central emphasis of the Cambridge anthropologists upon the seasonal cycle and the growth of the crops seems to be reflected in the frequent use of seasonal imagery in the poet's description of the evils of the modern world. We find two distinct uses of the seasonal cycle in this regard. In the first place, the state of contemporary civilization, and of man's spirit within it, is described a number of times, by Dame Edith, as a winter or polar region.<sup>78</sup> The evil and destructiveness of this "cold" works in symbolic opposition to the life-giving goodness of the warmth of the summer sun. The sun, as we shall see later, is in Dame Edith's mature poetry a central symbol and type of the activity of the Divine Spirit of love in creation, on both a physical and a spiritual level. On the natural plane, the sun literally causes the growth of plant and animal forms from the soil, in-





cluding the wheat which sustains man's body.<sup>79</sup> On the specifically human level, the sun of God's Spirit, acting within and without man, brings about spiritual growth from the earth of his physical nature.<sup>80</sup> In symbolic opposition to these constructive processes, the "cold" within the heart of man destroys the body and soul of rich and poor alike, reducing them to dust.

This opposition between the "coldness" of man's heart and the warmth of the sun is intimately associated, in The Song of the Cold and elsewhere, with Dame Edith's double-edged use of the symbol of gold. On the one hand we have the warm gold of sun, earth, wheat and body; another symbolic expression of the Divinity which is active in the growth of physical life from the soil, and spiritual life from man's body. On the other hand, in The Song of the Cold and other poems, there is the freezing gold of the rich and of the "cold idealists," which destroys the body and soul of Dives and Lazarus alike.<sup>81</sup> Just as the golden sun brings the gold of the wheat from the soil, so the gold of commerce is ultimately dust, and reduces its worshippers to dust.<sup>82</sup>

Thus we find a negative counterpart of the warm sun, soil, crops and bodies of the upturn of the seasonal cycle in the winter imagery of the later poetry. Similarly, a "double" of the moisture which is an essential element in plant growth is to be found in the ice of The Song





of the Cold and other poems,<sup>83</sup> and in the snow of The Coat of Fire.<sup>84</sup>

However, the evil in the heart of man is seen not merely as a cold responsible for a symbolic winter in his body and soul. It is likewise envisioned, especially in the Three Poems of the Atomic Age, as a destructive heat, which constitutes a demonic antitype to the expression of God's love and goodness in the warmth of the sun, and in the fires of physical and spiritual growth.<sup>85</sup> This evil heat is in turn seen as being responsible for a demonic summer of destruction.<sup>86</sup> In Invocation, this becomes an insect season of "small hopes, small fears," which are raised like flies from the corruption of modern society by "the old world's fevers."<sup>87</sup> In The Shadow of Cain it assumes an infinitely more terrible form in the dropping of the atomic bomb. This is seen as a destructive sun which not only destroys the real sun and all of its fruits, but initiates its own parody of the beneficent solar activity. Instead of bringing wheat from the soil, the atomic bomb cleaves the earth, releasing the destructive gold of Dives, and revealing the murdered Lazarus.<sup>89</sup> In these and other images, in The Shadow of Cain, we have a terrible parody of the seasonal cycle which expresses God's plan for man and nature. These include also the rain of destruction which has fallen on man, and the rivers and seas of his blood;<sup>90</sup> both of which are presumably antitypes of the moisture which is essential for crop growth.



Seasonal imagery is also used by Dame Edith in connection with the Biblical pattern of history to which the state of the contemporary world is related. Thus the new wisdom found by Adam in The Two Loves is described by images evidently intended to be expressive of the heat of the sun, and of its associated fruitfulness.<sup>91</sup> As we have seen already, this summer warmth of Adam's pastoral wisdom and goodness has degenerated either into a spiritual and physical winter, or into the demonic heat of a false summer of destruction. The love of Christ, which will in turn save humanity from this terrible situation, is also described in terms of seasonal imagery. In Still Falls the Rain, Dame Edith sees the blood of Christ as a healing shower which will restore the world after the ravages of social injustice and the destructive rain of war.<sup>92</sup> In The Canticle of the Rose, the cycle of plant growth and flowering is seen as a witness to the continuing activity of the Divine Force of love and life in the universe.<sup>93</sup> The constructive heat of this spirit shall finally be manifested in the "ultimate Fire" of Christ, "Who will burn away the cold in the heart of Man."<sup>94</sup> It may also be noted in passing that the heat of the false summer described above is, in The Coat of Fire, identified with the fires of God's wrath, which will descend upon the wicked on Judgement Day.<sup>95</sup>





In Dame Edith's treatment of the spiritual and physical decay of the individual through time in the later poetry, seasonal imagery is likewise prominent. In accordance with her continual association in her mature work of the various ages of man with the seasons of the year,<sup>96</sup> the state of the old and the dead is often described as cold, and is sometimes specifically identified with winter.<sup>97</sup> We also find seasonal imagery in those poems in which Dame Edith deals with the destructiveness of erotic passion. For example, in Heart and Mind and Dido's Song, the destructive fires of love are associated with the heat of the sun in its scorching, destructive aspect.<sup>98</sup>

In connection with the themes which we have been discussing in this chapter, Dame Edith sometimes employs imagery taken from the diurnal, as well as from the seasonal, cycle. In general, night and darkness are invested, by her, with their traditional associations with the forces of evil and destruction in the universe, and day and light are connected with those of goodness and life. Thus, in O yet forgive, Dame Edith refers to the "long night" of death,<sup>99</sup> while in The Canticle of the Rose, the light of day itself has become the blackness of night in the eyes of a fallen world.<sup>100</sup> In the title of Dirge for the New Sunrise, we have a demonic parody of daybreak, just as we have seen false summers in Dame Edith's later poetry.

It now only remains for us to examine the poet's use of various



Biblical figures and images in connection with the themes which we have been discussing. As has already been pointed out, the Bible gives Dame Edith not only isolated symbols, but also a whole cyclical vision of history, which extends in her poetry from the Fall to the Day of Judgement. We have noted already how she envisions Adam, after his fall from innocence and immortality, as having achieved a new pastoral wisdom and goodness through the activity of the spirit of God in and around him. Adam's virtues are, as we have seen, lost in Cain's murder of Abel, the type of all division by evil of man from his brother man. This separation is seen by Dame Edith as constituting a second fall, which she holds directly responsible for the state of the modern world. This fall is associated, by her, with man's descent from the pastoral virtues of Adam to the evils of the demonic city, of which Gomorrah is her favourite Biblical type. This demonic city first appears in her poetry in the London-Gomorrah of Gold Coast Customs, and is found again and again in her later work in descriptions of cities which become symbolic types of all of the evils which she finds in contemporary civilization.<sup>101</sup> It should be noted here that the contrast between the demonic city and an idealized countryside, in which Dame Edith sees the pastoral wisdom and goodness of Adam as still existing, is extremely important in the later poetry.





In The Shadow of Cain, Dame Edith describes the demonic city of modern man as that "built before the Flood by our brother Cain."<sup>102</sup> From this statement we may infer that she finds in the Flood, as in the fires which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, a type of the wrath of God which descends upon human evil. Accordingly, "the terrible rain" of the destruction of the Second World War, and the "seas of blood" which it has shed, are represented, by her, in several instances as being a second flood. The poet would thus seem to envision in this conflict not only human evil on the rampage but, likewise, a foretaste of the Divine indignation which will overwhelm that evil.

Before finally concluding our study of Dame Edith's use of the Bible in connection with her vision of evil in the contemporary world, some further mention of her use of certain Biblical figures should be made. As we have seen, in addition to the wrath of God, we also find in her later poetry the redeeming love of Christ. Thus we have mentioned how the atrocities and social evils of the modern world are conceived of, in some of the later poems, as being the crucifixion of Christ in the person of those whom He redeemed. The victims of war and injustice are also identified with Abel and Lazarus, figures who have been murdered, like Christ, but unlike Him, are unable to raise themselves from the dead. The rich, on the other hand, are identi-





fied variously, in the later poetry, with Cain, Judas and Dives.

Dame Edith's use of Biblical figures and images in connection  
 with the themes of evil and the destructiveness of time have, I believe,  
 already been sufficiently discussed in connection with individual  
 poems.

In conclusion, the close imaginative relationship in Dame Edith's later poetry of the three negative themes which we have discussed in this chapter should be emphasized. The frequent overlapping of the imagery used in connection with these concerns suggests that for Dame Edith the forces of evil and destruction in the universe are organically related in their nature, their spiritual and physical effects, and their ultimate destiny. Thus all would seem to be related, by the poet, to man's fallen condition. Similarly, in The Coat of Fire and Dirge for the New Sunrise, it is this fallen condition in all of its ramifications which is seen as responsible for the state of the modern world.<sup>104</sup> In the end its terrible weight will be lifted from the downtrodden by the Second Coming of Christ, and be merged with the wrath of God which will fall upon the damned on Judgement Day.



### CHAPTER III

#### THE POSITIVE COSMIC CYCLE IN DAME EDITH'S LATER POETRY

In our second chapter it has, it is hoped, been indicated that Ralph J. Mills, Jr. 's statements in "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell" concerning Dame Edith's later work do not give an accurate picture of this stage of her artistic career. In many individual poems, as we have seen, the cycle of life in creation seems to her to be either threatened or inactivated upon the one hand, or regarded as agonizing and sterile in certain of its aspects upon the other. In order to resolve the spiritual crisis occasioned for her by the Second World War, the poet had to supplement her vision of the Spirit of God at work in the normal processes of existence with a Christian vision of history culminating in the Second Coming of Christ and the Day of Judgement. Nevertheless, it remains true that in a very large number of her later poems Dame Edith is able to see the forces of evil and destruction in the universe as being subordinate to the principle of goodness and life in the context of a beneficent cosmic cycle. In this cycle the Godhead brings about regeneration by acting from within the normal processes of human





and natural existence, rather than from without. In this chapter we will discuss this consoling and often joyous cyclical vision of life which seems to predominate in Dame Edith's later poetry. We will then examine some imaginative patterns which seem to be incorporated in this vision. In addition to the three patterns which we discussed in our last chapter, we shall consider a fourth: the theories of alchemy. In connection with these four patterns we shall treat the most important of the images by which Dame Edith describes the cycle of death, growth and re-birth.

In Dame Edith's later poetry, as we have seen, we find an interaction in the world on both a spiritual and a physical level of the forces of evil, decay and death upon the one hand; and those of goodness, life and growth upon the other. The former would seem, in the case of man, to be ultimately attributed by Dame Edith to the fact of his fallen condition. The latter, as we see in such poems as How Many Heavens and The Bee-Keeper, are regarded by her as being the Spirit of God, immanent in creation at all levels of existence as the essence of their being.<sup>1</sup> This Divine force of life and love is seen, by the poet, as the dynamic mover of the processes of birth, growth and re-birth. It extends throughout creation to all beings alike, regardless of their fallen natures, and brings to them spiritual redemption and physical well-being.<sup>2</sup> Since this same spirit is the essence of all entities,



Dame Edith sees them as all being ultimately one. She is accordingly able to find a series of correspondences between the various levels of existence, a fact of great importance for the understanding of much of the imagery of her later poetry.

As we mentioned in our introduction, although Dame Edith at times sees the Divinity in creation as outweighed, threatened or even paralyzed by the forces of evil and decay, in a great many of her later pieces she sees it as continuing to predominate in a beneficent cycle of birth, growth, ripeness, decay, death and re-birth. Perhaps the fullest exposition of this cyclical vision in Dame Edith's later poetry is to be found in Beside the Yellow Foam that Sings of Lydian Airs, the first of three pieces entitled The Road to Thebes. This poem deals with the love, belief, growth and goodness produced by the Divine Spirit on the one hand, and with the hate, blindness, decay and human evil which exist in creation upon the other. Here, as in Elegy for Dylan Thomas, Dame Edith insists on the essential unity of all of these elements within the cycle of time.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while undoubtedly not attributing the evil and decay in the universe to the Divine Being Itself, she does envision them as an integral and necessary part of a divinely ordained and ultimately beneficent scheme of creation. At their worst they are merely preludes to new life and growth, to be brought about by the Divinity acting in





man and in nature:

. . .airs and prayers  
 Arise from the fertility of vines,  
 From cornucopias and corruptions, continents  
 Of growth, from where those seeds, the Dead, are sown  
 To be re-born, and germs of evil that exist in Matter  
 Are changed by holy earth, to the common good,  
 To usefulness, fertility.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, in Beside the Yellow Foam that Sings of Lydian Airs, Dame Edith sees the physical and spiritual deaths caused by evil and time as being a preparation for re-birth. In other poems she finds the additional consolation that at no stage in the cosmic cycle are these deaths absolute. The Divine Spirit is seen as being the essence of even the so-called inanimate levels of being. Thus, in How Many Heavens, God is envisioned as "the stone in the still stone;"<sup>5</sup> and in Hymn to Venus, we have the state of the mineral described as a form of life.<sup>6</sup> The dust to which all material entities return is also the earth, the great mother of all terrestrial beings, from which the Divine Spirit raises higher forms of life. The passing of any individual entity is thus really its return to the great reservoir of life from which it came, to be re-born in new forms.

Moreover, as we have mentioned before, Dame Edith sees the Divine love and goodness extending throughout creation to all individual beings, regardless of their fallen condition. Sometimes we find the Divinity bringing to man himself physical well-being; and some-





times joy in an awareness of the cosmic plan, with its ultimate goodness and beauty.<sup>7</sup> Dame Edith dwells particularly on the way in which the Divine love in creation extends to the "maimed of life." Thus, in The Bee-Keeper, we find it blessing and enlightening an old woman.<sup>8</sup> In such pieces as Tattered Serenade: Beggar to Shadow and Holiday, this love is seen as bringing a temporary re-birth even to the inhabitants of the demonic city of Lazarus and Dives.<sup>9</sup>

Within the framework of the essentially optimistic vision which we have been describing, Dame Edith's tragic sense of human evil as it is expressed in contemporary conditions and events, of the physical and spiritual decay of the individual through time, and of the destructiveness of erotic passion, is either tempered or replaced by a joyous vision of the ultimate goodness and beauty of life. Thus, in Invocation, the new life and love of spring is seen as a sign of the return to the modern world, presumably without the need of extraordinary intervention on the part of the Deity, of the pastoral wisdom and goodness of Adam.<sup>10</sup> This vision recurs again more than once in Dame Edith's later poetry. For instance, in Gardeners and Astronomers, the gardeners, who are typical of the wisdom of Adam

See all miasmas of the human filth but as the dung  
In which to sow great flowers,  
Tall moons and mornings, seeds and sires and suns.<sup>11</sup>



In this passage social corruption is seen, not only as being transient, but as ultimately subserving the needs of goodness and of life.

Similarly, the aging of the individual is often regarded, in Dame Edith's later poetry, as a positive rather than a negative process. The decay of man's body is seen in a number of pieces as being accompanied by a ripening of the spirit within him.<sup>12</sup> In such pieces, we have the figure of the wise old man or woman, in whom the vitality of youth has been replaced by the peace and joy of the contemplation of the beneficence and beauty of the universe. As Mills points out, the wise old woman of Invocation and other later pieces is doubtless a poetic role assumed by Dame Edith herself.<sup>13</sup> In addition to receiving wisdom from within, old age likewise, as we have already noted, shares in the divine love which extends throughout creation to all beings. Thus the terrible vision of the spiritual and physical decay of man through time, which we see in such pieces as Lo, this is she that was the world's desire, is counterbalanced in the later poetry by one in which the Divinity within and without man is seen as producing a blessed state of wisdom, peace and joy. Similarly, the state of the dead, rather than being regarded as an eternal anguish, is seen in such poems as O yet forgive and Eurydice as a time of wisdom and peace in





in the realization that

. . . Love is not changed by Death  
And nothing is lost, and all in the end is harvest.<sup>14</sup>

In accordance with Dame Edith's vision, in many of the later poems, of the new life and love of the upturn of the cycles of time as being blessed and immortal, rather than fallen and doomed, she often sees the vitality of young love as being creative rather than destructive. Thus, in Green Song, we have a vision of the love of boy and girl, presumably as a part of the force of Divine love in the world, redeeming the heart of man from its fallen condition.<sup>15</sup>

In The Queen of Scotland's Reply to a Reproof from John Knox, Mary sees that from the ecstatic union of body and soul in erotic passion was born "All the wisdom of great Solomon."<sup>16</sup> Thus human love, besides being a part of the great universal process of physical generation, is likewise a force of spiritual creation and regeneration. Accordingly, in contrast to Dame Edith's sense of the folly of young love in such poems as Green Flows the River of Lethe - Q, we have many instances in the later poetry in which she finds in it a sublime wisdom.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, in many of her later poems, Dame Edith achieves a consoling and often joyous vision of the ultimate goodness and beauty of the universe. Although the negative side of existence is still present, it is seen as transient, or even as subserving the ends of the positive



forces of the cycle of time. The extraordinarily rich poetic expression which this positive vision is given in Dame Edith's later work would seem to result primarily from her synthesis of four imaginative patterns and their associated images. Three of these, ascent and descent through the "Aristotelian" categories, the "Frazerian" cycle of death and life, and the Biblical pattern of history, we have met with before. The fourth pattern, the theories of alchemy, is mainly operative in connection with Dame Edith's joyous vision of birth and growth in the world, and discussion of it has accordingly been reserved for this chapter. Let us now examine these four patterns and their associated images.

Just as in Dame Edith's later poetry we have seen a descent down the scale of being, so we likewise find there a corresponding vision of ascent. It is important to stress once again, in this connection, that the poet would emphasize the organic unity of being as much as she would its divisions. As we have seen, all created entities are shaped by the one Divine Spirit from the same matter, linking them with one another and with God. Moreover, as we have noted above, Dame Edith sees the so-called inanimate state, in certain poems, as really being alive and capable of growth. Accordingly, in each of the great categories of terrestrial being recognized by Aristotle, we see at least the potentiality of the natures of higher levels. In some cases this becomes actualized in an ascent up the ladder of matter and form. Perhaps the





most important potentiality for ascent is that of the earth, from which all other terrestrial beings ultimately arise through an interaction with the Divine Spirit.<sup>18</sup>

The essential unity of all beings through potentiality finds expression in Dame Edith's later work in the large number of radical images in which a level of being is endowed with the nature of one of those above it. Thus the inanimate is, a number of times, given animal properties in Dame Edith's later poetry.<sup>19</sup> Sometimes, as in Out of School, in which the poet sees the "wrinkled mask of Pithecanthropus Erectus/Hide the great brow of Socrates,"<sup>20</sup> her notion of ascent seems to be linked with the Darwinian conception of evolution.

The process of ascent through the levels of being corresponds, as we have noted before, to the upturn of the "Frazerian" cycle of life and death. The influence of the Cambridge anthropologists on Dame Edith's work in this connection is suggested by her almost obsessive use of seasonal and vegetative imagery to express her positive vision of rebirth and growth. In this connection, Ralph J. Mills, Jr. notes in "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell" the central importance of the sun:

we do not read too far before we sense that Dame Edith has constructed a kind of solar myth or cosmology at the center of most of the odes. As it does in our own universe, everything circles about the sun, and each of the various symbols operates in conjunction with it. The first major statement of the sun's place is given in the opening stanza of An Old Woman:





For the sun is the first lover of the world,  
 Blessing all humble creatures, all life-giving,  
 Blessing the end of life and the work done,  
 The clean and the unclean, ores in earth and splendours  
 Within the heart of man, that second sun.<sup>21</sup>

The sun, as the type and symbol of the Godhead Who both brings about and sanctifies the upturn of the cycle of life and death, is thus the centre of Dame Edith's poetic universe. In this regard it manifests the Divine Force of life and love both literally and figuratively. In either case, the action of the Divine Spirit, as represented by the sun, is both spiritual and physical. As we see in How Many Heavens and The Bee-Keeper, Dame Edith sees in all terrestrial beings, including man, a sacramental union of the two principles.<sup>22</sup> The activity of the Divinity accordingly consists in bringing about a growth of both body and soul. Moreover, these two elements of life are mutually dependent. Thus, as we have seen in our last chapter, poverty causes the atrophy of man's soul, but his resurrection on a physical level only leads to the destruction of his body and spirit alike. Accordingly, the Divine Force of life and of love which is literally and symbolically represented by the sun provides for man a "rich wisdom" on the one hand, and "the holy life-giving gold of the wheat" on the other.<sup>23</sup>

In accordance with the central importance of the sun in Dame Edith's later poetry, its heat and light, and their ebb and flow in the



seasonal and diurnal cycles, are extremely prominent in her later work in expressing her vision of the cycle of life and death in the universe. We have already discussed their employment in connection with the negative side of this cycle in the last chapter. Just as the cold and darkness of winter and night represent in her poetry the absence of the Godhead which is evil and decay, so the heat and light of the sun in spring, summer and autumn are expressive of the action of the Divine force of goodness and growth in the universe.<sup>24</sup>

Second in symbolic importance only to the sun, in Dame Edith's later poetry, is the earth. As we have seen, from the dynamic interaction of the Godhead with the earth in the cycle of time, arise all terrestrial forms. In accordance with the primitive religious beliefs described by the Cambridge anthropologists, the Divine Spirit, represented by the sun, is consistently figured in Dame Edith's later poetry as masculine and the earth as feminine.<sup>25</sup> The latter, in providing the physical matter for the Divinity to form, is the great mother of all earthly beings. She would seem to contain the potentiality of the good and evil, life and death and growth and decay in creation which produce the cycles of time.<sup>26</sup> The earth is accordingly both womb and tomb. On the one hand, she is the dust to which all beings return through the evil and decay which she has transmitted to them.





On the other, in conjunction with the Divine Spirit, she purifies the corruption of the dead, and makes them ready for rebirth.<sup>27</sup> The earth, in Dame Edith's later poetry, is accordingly good, evil or neutral, depending on how she is regarded.

Thus, in Dame Edith's later work, the seasonal cycle and its elements are central to the poet's expression of her vision of the cycle of life and death. Another indication of the influence of the work of Frazer and his followers in this regard is the prominence of vegetation imagery in her later poetry. The growth and fruition of vegetation are for Dame Edith once again expressive of the activity of the Divine Force of life and love in the universe.<sup>28</sup> In this connection, the prominence of corn and vine in her later poetry is additional evidence of the influence of the Cambridge anthropologists.<sup>29</sup> The fruit-tree and the rose likewise appear frequently in her later work.<sup>30</sup>

Dame Edith's sense of the organic unity of all terrestrial beings enables her to employ the seasonal cycle and its elements in describing the other cycles of life and death which she perceives in creation. Thus she sees a series of types of the sun in man, in certain animals and plants, and in the jewel. These express the activity of the Divinity at all levels of being in causing growth and generation. A parallel is likewise drawn between the rhythm of the seasons and the human con-



dition in Dame Edith's later poetry. Thus, in Invocation, the historical process of the death and rebirth of the human race is described in terms of seasonal imagery. The same is true of the cycle of the individual human life. Thus the vitality of youth is associated with spring and summer, and old age with the ripeness and harvest of autumn.<sup>31</sup>

Before we leave our discussion of the cycle of life and death in Dame Edith's later poetry, we should note in this connection a number of recurring images which seem to provide us with additional evidence of the influence of the Cambridge anthropologists. On the one hand, corresponding to "mother earth," we seem to have a number of types of the female fertility goddess who was so prominent in the work of Frazer and his followers. Thus the young girl and the old woman who occur again and again in the later poetry are suggestive of the corn-maiden and the corn-goddess.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the figure of the aged or dead Venus appears there a number of times.<sup>33</sup> We likewise have a number of male figures in the later poetry who suggest the influence of the works of the Cambridge anthropologists. Appearing in connection with the ebb and flow of the Divine Force of life we have on the one hand the figure of the young man, god or hero, and on the other that of the dead knight or king.<sup>34</sup> These could very well reflect the dying and reviving gods and the sacred kings with



whom the religions studied by Frazer and his followers connected the waxing and waning of the vital forces in nature. Moreover, the primitive belief documented by the Cambridge anthropologists that certain plants and animals are special vessels of the divine mana seems to be reflected in Dame Edith's use of vegetation and animal imagery in evoking the vitality of creation. In the latter case, her favourite symbols are the bull, the bird, the horse and the lion,<sup>35</sup> of which the first two are especially prominent in the primitive beliefs studied by Frazer and his school.<sup>36</sup>

In our last chapter we saw how Dame Edith, in certain of her later poems, had to re-enforce her vision of the activity of the Divinity within man and nature with a Biblical vision of history in order to surmount the spiritual crisis occasioned by the horrors of the Second World War. We also find in her later poetry the use of Biblical figures and images to express the beneficent activity of the Godhead within the normal processes of creation. Thus, in Holiday and Harvest, she identifies the Divine Force of life and love in the cosmos with Christ.<sup>37</sup> In the latter poem, and in An Old Woman, we have a radical image by which the sun, "the father of all things," is seen as the patriarch Abraham.<sup>38</sup> The Burning Bush and the Pentecostal Fire likewise appear in Dame Edith's later poetry as symbols of the immanence of the Divinity in creation.<sup>39</sup> In the sphere of





human life, as we have seen, the activity of the Godhead is associated in The Two Loves with the pastoral wisdom and goodness of Adam.<sup>40</sup>

A fourth imaginative pattern which appears to be incorporated in Dame Edith's later poetry is the symbolism of alchemy. In "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," Ralph J. Mills, Jr. comments on the importance of alchemical imagery in the later work:

By using the sun as a central and controlling symbol for her poetic macrocosm, and seeing it as a redemptive power at work on earth, Dame Edith has had recourse to the main ideas of alchemy, as well as the procedures and expectations of that arcane science. In his book Anatomy of Criticism, Northrop Frye has a passage describing the alchemistic symbols which might almost be read as a gloss on a number of Dame Edith's poems.

The symbolism of alchemy is apocalyptic symbolism. . . the center of nature, the gold and jewels hidden in the earth, is eventually to be united to its circumference in the sun, moon, and stars of the heavens; the center of the spiritual world, the soul of man, is united to its circumference in God. Hence there is a close association between the purifying of the human soul and the transmuting of earth to gold, not only literal gold but the fiery quintessential gold of which the heavenly bodies are made.<sup>41</sup>

Alchemical theory as described in this general way by Frye is obviously, as Mills notes, in accord with Dame Edith's vision of the Divine Spirit producing physical and spiritual growth in both man and nature. A closer examination of the theories of alchemy will show that they likewise agree in their major details with the other imaginative patterns used by Dame Edith in her later poetry.



The theory of alchemy was founded upon two basic a priori assumptions: the unity of matter and "the existence of a potent transmuting agent, known as the Philosopher's Stone."<sup>42</sup>

This so-called 'medicine of the metals' was held to be capable of curing the imagined disease of the base metals, thereby ennobling them to the perfect metals, silver and gold. From the postulate of the unity of matter it followed that such an agent should also be effective in healing the infirmities of man, under the name of the Elixir Vitae, or Elixir of Life.

Thus, according to alchemical theory, all forms of matter are one in origin; these forms are produced by evolutionary processes; matter has a common soul which alone is permanent, the body, or outward form being merely a mode of manifestation of the soul and therefore, transitory and transmutable into other forms.<sup>43</sup>

These ideas were embodied in alchemical thinking in the 'Aristotelian "Theory of the Four Elements." This theory was based upon the "Doctrine of the Two Contraries," which had its roots deep in the primitive religious thought studied by the Cambridge anthropologists:

. . . the universe of the ancient religion of Mesopotamia was conceived as being under the control of Baal, the Father God, and Astaroth, the Mother Goddess. Baal, the Sun-god was a hot, active, light, immaterial and positive principle. Astaroth, the Moon-goddess, was cold, passive, heavy, material and negative. Osiris and Isis took similar positions in the cosmology and religion of ancient Egypt.<sup>44</sup>

This "Doctrine of the Two Contraries" was incorporated into the "Theory of the Four Elements":

Aristotle's theory rested upon the supposed existence of four elementary properties or qualities. These formed two pairs of opposites: hot and cold, wet and dry. When combined pairwise, . . . they gave rise to the four fundamental simple bodies, or elements: earth, air, fire and water.





All kinds of matter were held to be composed of these four elements, associated in different proportions. Furthermore, according to Aristotle, the four elements were also incorporated with a prima materia: this had no material existence until it became allied with 'form,' after which it could enable one element to pass into another, by a process of transmutation.

Hovering behind these four elements was a shadowy, ill-defined fifth. Aristotle called it ether, the element of the stars; the neo-Platonists called it Logos, otherwise the Word, God, or Reason; and among medieval philosophers it was known as the quinta essentia, fifth being, or quintessence, sometimes confused in alchemy with the Philosopher's Stone.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, in holding that all substances were composed of different proportions of four basic principles, "The Theory of The Four Elements" embodied the alchemical belief in the fundamental unity of all matter. Moreover, this theory likewise implied the possibility of transmutation. By altering the proportions of the four basic qualities in matter, it could be changed from one form to another.<sup>46</sup>

A modification of the "Theory of The Four Elements," the "Sulphur-Mercury Theory," formed the basic alchemical thinking. This theory conceived of all matter as being ultimately composed of "sophic sulphur" and "sophic mercury," two abstract principles made up respectively of the hot and dry and the cold and moist qualities underlying matter.<sup>47</sup> These two principles, in varying degrees of purity, combined to produce the various kinds of matter:

. . . according to medieval alchemical thought, when the impure principles, sulphur and mercury, were conjoined in natural processes under planetary influences they gave rise to base metals,



such as tin and lead; when they were of high purity, they gave silver and gold; but when each of the two principles was of superfine purity, they yielded the Philosopher's Stone.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, alchemy saw, at least as far as the metals were concerned, a hierarchic arrangement of the various forms of matter, extending from the base metals, through gold and silver, up to the Philosopher's Stone.

The procedure of the alchemist was to attempt to extract from pure gold and pure silver sophic sulphur and sophic mercury respectively, and then combine them to form the Philosopher's Stone. This substance could in turn be used to transmute the base metals into silver and gold.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the two basic assumptions of alchemical theory, the essential unity of matter and the possibility of its transmutation from one form to another, parallel Dame Edith's vision of the fundamental oneness of terrestrial being which makes possible the processes of ascent and descent through its various levels.

The alchemical notion of the "diseased" condition of the base metals and of the human body, which might be "healed" by the Philosopher's Stone and the Elixir of Life respectively, accords very well with Dame Edith's conception of the dynamics of the "Frazerian" cycle of life and death. As we have seen, the Divine Spirit, represented by the sun, is envisioned by her as healing the diseases of evil and decay inherent in matter, which is represented by the earth. The possibility of the influence of alchemical theory upon the development of these two complex





symbols of earth and sun is obvious. Throughout alchemical thought as outlined above, there runs the notion of the opposition of two principles whose properties and functions more or less correspond with those of Dame Edith's earth and sun. Significantly enough, this concept is rooted, as we have noted, in the same primitive religious thinking which seems to have deeply influenced Dame Edith's poetry through the work of Frazer and his followers. We find the influence of the conception of the sun-god Baal, "the hot, active, light immaterial and positive principle," and of the moon-goddess Astaroth, "the cold, passive, heavy, material and negative" principle, throughout alchemical theory. In the first place, we have the hot and dry and the cold and moist elements of sophic sulphur and sophic mercury respectively, the union of which produces all matter. These two principles were represented by the alchemists as being respectively sun and moon, masculine and feminine and active and passive.<sup>50</sup> Their combination in the Philosopher's Stone and the Elixir of Life in turn represented the soul of matter as opposed to its body. Finally, in the "Theory of the Four Elements," we have the notion of the quintessence as opposed to the other four elements. This, as we have seen, was identified by Aristotle with the fire of the stars, and by the neo-Platonists with the Divinity. The possible influence of any or all of these concepts on Dame Edith's sun and earth, which are very like Baal and Astaroth, is obvious.





We have noted Dame Edith's use of Biblical images in connection with the operation of the Divine Spirit within creation in her later poetry. This is paralleled by the close connection in alchemical thinking between the "healing" of matter and the salvation of man's soul noted by Frye.<sup>51</sup> Thus, just as Dame Edith identifies the Divine Spirit of rebirth with Christ, so the alchemists saw in the Philosopher's Stone an earthly type of Christ and the Trinity, and drew parallels between alchemical processes and the Christian doctrines of the Resurrection and Redemption.<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, the theories of alchemy seem to agree with Dame Edith's use of Biblical figures and images in her later poetry to describe the activity of the Godhead within creation, just as they do with the pattern of ascent and descent through the "Aristotelian" categories and the "Frazerian" cycle of life and death.

Accordingly, as we might expect, there seems to be a fairly extensive influence of alchemical theory on the imagery of Dame Edith's later poetry. We have already discussed its possible contribution to her central symbols of the sun and the earth. In connection with the former, we find employed again and again the image of gold. This metal, unless it be the destructive gold of Dives, symbolizes for Dame Edith the treasure of the beauty and the goodness which results from the activity of the Divinity in creation. Thus, the sun itself is represented time and time again as being made of gold, presumably the



"fiery, quintessential gold of the stars" mentioned by Frye.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, just as we find in terrestrial being a series of "images" of the sun which are expressive of the activity of the Divine Spirit in all of its levels, so we likewise find there a number of "doubles" of the gold of the sun. In the plant world, we have the gold of certain flowers and fruits and of the grain.<sup>54</sup> In the animal kingdom we find that of the lion, bee and other animals.<sup>55</sup> The body of man is likewise represented as being composed of the precious metal in both youth and old age.<sup>56</sup> By her extensive use of the symbol of gold, Dame Edith conveys with striking beauty her vision of the holiness and splendour of all levels of terrestrial being due to the presence in them of the Godhead. A similar notion is presumably intended to be imparted by her extensive use of gem imagery in describing all of the divisions of earthly existence.<sup>57</sup>

We likewise find over and over again in Dame Edith's later poetry the qualities and the elements of Aristotle's "Theory of the Four Elements." These generally appear singly, and in such cases it is usually impossible to tell whether or not Dame Edith had Aristotle's hypothesis in mind when she employed them. That she was familiar with his theory, however, is obvious from those passages in The Bee-Keeper and Beside the Yellow Foam that Sings of Lydian Airs in which all of the four elements appear in conjunction.<sup>58</sup> In both of these cases, it





would seem that she sees them as the basic principles of terrestrial creation. That she was likewise aware of the alchemical connections of the "Theory of the Four Elements," is evident from the following passage from Gardeners and Astronomers:

The orange tree still sighs  
 ' I am the dark that changed to water and to air,  
 The water and the air that changed to gold,  
 The gold that turned into a plant. From  
 the cool wave of the air grows a smooth Stem,  
 and from this the gold, cold orange tree. '59

In this passage, an ascent from the "inanimate" to the vegetative level of being is represented in terms of an alchemical transmutation of two of the four elements.

Our discussion of the possible influence of the theories of alchemy upon Dame Edith's later poetry completes our examination of her consoling and even joyous vision of the way in which the Divinity working within creation counteracts the forces of evil and decay through a cycle of birth, growth, ripeness, decay, death and rebirth. We have noted in our study the poet's insistence on the essential unity of all of these elements within the beneficent plan of creation. We have likewise seen how the three imaginative patterns with which we have been dealing in our last two chapters, in conjunction with the theories of alchemy, seem to lie behind a number of the most important images and image patterns with which she expresses her joyous vision of the dynamic presence of the Godhead within creation.



## CONCLUSION

To conclude our study of thematic imagery in Dame Edith's poetry, we shall review some of the images and image patterns which we have seen in her later work. We have observed a fundamental dichotomy in her later vision which consists in a perception of the activity in creation of a Divine Spirit of life and love upon the one hand, and the operation of forces of evil and decay upon the other. We have seen this ambivalence alike with regard to her use of the patterns of ascent and descent through the "Aristotelian" categories of terrestrial being, of the "Frazerian" cycle of life and death, and the cycle of Biblical history. We shall let this duality determine the over-all pattern of our survey of her imagery, discussing first that used in connection with the positive aspects of her vision, and then that with which she expresses the negative side of her awareness. In the latter case, it will be sufficient to allude to the images used by the poet in connection with the evil manifested in contemporary social conditions and events. In the course of our survey, we shall attempt to demonstrate that the images used by her to describe activity of the forces of evil and decay in society form for the most part demonic "parodies" of those which express the action of the God-head in creation.





The controlling image of the positive side of Dame Edith's vision is that of the pastoral landscape, in which man still preserves the wisdom and goodness of Adam. This landscape, although in a sense fallen, is one in which the Divine Spirit and matter, represented by the sun and the earth respectively, interact to produce an ultimately good, beautiful and joyous cycle of birth, growth, ripeness, decay, death and rebirth. In this cycle, we have an ascent and descent of beings within a hierarchy of organically related forms. These correspond to the four great categories of terrestrial being recognized by Aristotle: the inanimate, the vegetative, the animal and the human. Within these four great divisions, Dame Edith seems to recognize yet further gradations of being. Thus, a relatively complete list of the hierarchy of the terrestrial forms which we see in her later poetry would run as follows: earth, gem, plant, flower, fruit and grain, body, the hearts of animals, and the heart and mind of man. Above these we have, of course, the Divinity and the sun, the latter of which both literally and figuratively represents the activity of the Godhead in creation. This action is expressed in Dame Edith's later poetry, as we have seen, by the association with certain of the levels of being of the images of gold and the sun.

As we have noted, Dame Edith sees the hierarchy of forms in the universe as being organically related, and she would stress their essential unity more than she would their divisions. Accordingly, she sees in the lower terrestrial forms at least the potentiality of those above them,





and the higher as incorporating organically within themselves the natures of those below them. Thus, we have in both her earlier and later work images in which one of the lower categories of being is endowed with the properties of one of those above it and vice versa.

Dame Edith, in her later poetry, envisions a cycle of life and death operating as a master pattern at various levels of existence in creation. Accordingly, the waxing and waning of the heat and light of the sun in the seasonal and diurnal cycles are extremely prominent in the imagery of her later work. Corresponding to the seasons, we have the annual ebb and flow of life in the plant and animal kingdoms. We likewise see the more prolonged rhythms of the lives of various animals and of individual men. Finally, we have in Dame Edith's later work, hints at the still more extended cycles of the evolution and destruction of whole species,<sup>1</sup> and we likewise find a well-developed vision of the historical growth, death and rebirth of the human race.

In accordance with the central importance of the sun in Dame Edith's poetic universe, the seasonal and diurnal revolutions form master symbols to which the other cycles which we have just been discussing are related. This is particularly true of the rhythm of the seasons, with their associated birth, growth, death and rebirth. The heat and light of the sun in spring, summer and autumn both literally and figuratively represent the positive activity of the Divinity in creation.



The waxing of plant growth during that period is in turn very prominent in Dame Edith's later poetry in representing the results of that activity. The dynamic presence of the Godhead in the cosmos is likewise, as we have noted above, expressed by figures and images taken from the cycle of Biblical history: Christ, Abraham, the Pentecostal Fires and the Burning Bush.

In parodic contrast to the pastoral landscape in which the Divinity brings about the ultimately beneficent cycle of life and death, we have in many of Dame Edith's later poems the demonic city. This typifies for her all of the evils of the modern world. In it, the beneficent activity of the sun is parodied by "The ultimate cold within the heart of Man." Accordingly, the brotherhood of all men in the pastoral wisdom and goodness of Adam is replaced by the brotherhood in death of Lazarus and Dives, or the murderousness of Cain.

The ascent of higher forms from the soil in the pastoral world finds its negative counterpart in the degeneration of man through a series of animal forms, such as the ape, the tiger, the insect and the worm, to the inanimate. The physical and spiritual lifelessness to which man is ultimately reduced by social injustice and by war is represented by the images of stone, rag, bone and dust. The latter would seem to be a parody of the soil from which new forms are raised by the sun.





The heavy emphasis upon the seasonal cycle and its associated phenomena in the expression of the positive vision of the later poetry is paralleled by the use of parodic seasonal imagery in connection with the evils of the modern world. Thus, we have the symbolic winter of modern society, with its associated images of ice, snow and cold; which parodies the fruitful summer warmth of the pastoral world. The contemporary world is also represented in terms of a demonic summer of violence. In particular, we should notice Dame Edith's representation of the atomic bomb as a parodic sun in Dirge for the New Sunrise and The Shadow of Cain. We also have the evil gold of the rich, which functions as a diabolical "shadow" of the gold of the summer sun and its fruits; and the "terrible rain" of war, which parodies the moisture essential for crop growth.

The same balancing of negative and positive images is to be found in connection with Dame Edith's use of symbols taken from the cycle of Biblical history. The creative and redemptive love of Christ, and the life-giving paternity of Abraham, find their demonic counterparts in the modern world in the treachery of Judas, and the murderousness of Cain. The pastoral wisdom and goodness of Adam is likewise symbolically contrasted with the degeneracy of Lazarus and Dives, and the "Eden" of the pastoral landscape with the wickedness of the latter-day Gomorrah. Similarly, the Burning Bush and Pentecostal



Fire are opposed to the flames which destroy Gomorrah, and those which will torment the wicked on Judgement Day.

The above brief survey of the imagery in Dame Edith's later poetry would seem to suggest that there is a deliberate and careful balancing of the symbols used in connection with the demonic city of the modern world against those which describe the pastoral landscape. The same of course applies to the images used by the poet in connection with her vision of the destructiveness of time and of erotic passion. This technique of symbolic parody of course increases the richness and resonance of both sets of images involved. Along with the fusion of imaginative patterns which we have noted in the later work, it stands as another indication of the great virtuosity of Dame Edith's poetic technique.



## FOOTNOTES

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems. (London: Macmillan, 1957.)  
The text actually employed was the third edition of this volume, printed in 1961.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Fifoot, A Bibliography of Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell. (London: Rupert Harte-Davis, 1961.) 70-71 and 73.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 71-73.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 40-50 and 113-115.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 32.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 62, 70 and 73.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 35, 40, 71 and 73.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 34, 38, 70-71 and 73.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 55-57, 60, 62-63 and 71-73.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 71-73.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 51, 53, and 61.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 61 and 64.





## Chapter I

<sup>1</sup> The Hambone and the Heart, ll. 18-25, 57-80 and 139-147.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., ll. 67-68, 70 and 75.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., ll. 129-132.

<sup>4</sup> Metamorphosis, ll. 79-82.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., ll. 83-85 and 93-96.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., ll. 39-61.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., ll. 64-68.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., ll. 267-274.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., ll. 261-266.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., ll. 281-288.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," Chicago Review, XIV, no. 4; (Spring, 1961), 47.

<sup>12</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems (3rd ed.; London: Macmillan, 1961), xxxii.

<sup>13</sup> Elegy on Dead Fashion, ll. 57-90.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., ll. 309-312.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., ll. 193-196.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., ll. 191-192.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., ll. 90.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., ll. 91-100 and 165-172.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., ll. 189-204.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., ll. 247-252.



<sup>21</sup>Ibid., l. 365.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., ll. 363-376.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., ll. 385-396.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., ll. 229-240 and 281-284.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., ll. 389-394.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., ll. 385-388.

<sup>27</sup>Mills, "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," 47 and 51-52.

<sup>28</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Modern Values," The Spectator, CXLI, (Dec. 22, 1928), 950-951.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 950.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 951.

<sup>31</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems. (3rd ed. London: Macmillan, 1961), xv.

<sup>32</sup>In Tradition and Experiment in Present-Day Literature. (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), 74-97.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>34</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Modern Values," 951.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 951.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 951.

<sup>37</sup>Quoted by Timothy Green in "'I am an Electric Eel in a Pond of Catfish,'" Life, LIV, (Jan. 4, 1963), 62.

<sup>38</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Some Notes on My Own Poetry," London Mercury, XXXI (Mar. 1935), 453.

<sup>39</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems (3rd ed. London: Macmillan, 1961), 425-426.





<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 237.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., xxxvi.

<sup>42</sup>Gold Coast Customs, ll. 272-282.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., ll. 84-93 and 155-185.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., ll. 59-66.

<sup>45</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, (3rd ed. London: Macmillan, 1961), xxxv.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., xxxvi.

<sup>47</sup>Mills, "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," 47-48.

<sup>48</sup>Gold Coast Customs, ll. 46-9 and 139-150.

<sup>49</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, (3rd ed. London: Macmillan, 1961), xxxv-xxxvi and xxxvii.

<sup>50</sup>Gold Coast Customs, ll. 59-73 and 94-117.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., ll. 46-49.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., ll. 46-49.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., ll. 171-180.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., ll. 181 and 428-434.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., ll. 415-434.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., l. 335.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., ll. 74-75 and 350-355.

<sup>58</sup>Mills, "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," 47.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 35-47.

<sup>60</sup>Gold Coast Customs, ll. 195-199.



<sup>61</sup> Ibid., ll. 84-87 and 379-337.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., ll. 327-337.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., ll. 325-326.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., ll. 195-199.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., ll. 178-185.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., ll. 186-194.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., ll. 195-199.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., ll. 386-408.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., ll. 473-504.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., l. 526.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., ll. 527-533.

<sup>72</sup> Mills, "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," 53.

<sup>73</sup> W. J. Jones, A History of Western Philosophy (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952), 196-199.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>75</sup> Metamorphosis, ll. 261-265.

<sup>76</sup> Edith Sitwell, Poetry and Criticism ("The Hogarth Essays," XI), (London: Hogarth, 1925), 18.

<sup>77</sup> Ihab H. Hassan, "Edith Sitwell and the Symbolist Tradition," Comparative Literature, VII (1955), 424.

<sup>78</sup> Elegy on Dead Fashion, ll. 229-234 and 281-284.

<sup>79</sup> John B. Vickery, "The Golden Bough and Modern Poetry," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, XV (March, 1957), 271.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 272.



<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 272.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 272.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 272-273.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 273.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 273.

<sup>86</sup>Elegy on Dead Fashion, ll. 57-90 and Gold Coast Customs, ll. 527-533.

<sup>87</sup>Revelation to John, 17-18.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 6, 9 and 17, 6.

## Chapter II

<sup>1</sup>Mills, "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," 52-53.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>4</sup>Dirge for the New Sunrise, ll. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup>Still Falls the Rain, Three Poems of the Atomic Age and The War Orphans.

<sup>6</sup>The Two Loves, ll. 32-40.

<sup>7</sup>Invocation, An Old Woman and Gardeners and Astronomers.

<sup>8</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems (3rd ed. London: Macmillan, 1961), xiii.

<sup>9</sup>The Song of the Cold, l. 130.

<sup>10</sup>The Shadow of Cain, ll. 1-52.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., ll. 56-78.





<sup>12</sup> Ibid., ll. 79-84.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., ll. 97-105.

<sup>14</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems (3rd ed. London: Macmillan, 1961), xxxv.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., xlii.

<sup>16</sup> The Song of the Cold, ll. 1-27.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., ll. 28-29.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., ll. 20-29.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., ll. 48-74.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., ll. 84-86.

<sup>21</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems. (3rd ed. London: Macmillan, 1961), xliii-xliv.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., xliii.

<sup>23</sup> The Shadow of Cain, ll. 83-96.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., ll. 101-129.

<sup>25</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems. (3rd ed. London: Macmillan, 1961), xlv.

<sup>26</sup> Invocation, ll. 10-20. Poor Young Simpleton, II, ll. 1-4, Gardeners and Astronomers, ll. 28-33.

<sup>27</sup> Street Song, ll. 13-16.

<sup>28</sup> The Shadow of Cain, ll. 130-136.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., l. 137.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., ll. 139-154.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., ll. 161-162.



- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., ll. 161-162.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., ll. 163-164 and 169-170.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., ll. 163-172.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., ll. 173-174.
- <sup>36</sup> Still Falls the Rain, ll. 1-16.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., ll. 17-34.
- <sup>38</sup> Dirge for the New Sunrise, ll. 23-24.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., l. 34.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., ll. 2-3.
- <sup>41</sup> The Canticle of the Rose, ll. 51-60.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., ll. 1-13 and 51-60.
- <sup>43</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems. (3rd ed. London: Macmillan, 1961), xlv.
- <sup>44</sup> The Two Loves, l. 35.
- <sup>45</sup> Bagatelle, l. 6.
- <sup>46</sup> Song: Where is all the bright company gone, ll. 12-16.
- <sup>47</sup> The Poet Laments the Coming of Old Age, ll. 33-40.
- <sup>48</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems. (3rd ed. London: Macmillan, 1961), xxxv.
- <sup>49</sup> Green Song, ll. 1-3.
- <sup>50</sup> An Old Woman, ll. 64-65.
- <sup>51</sup> Out of School, ll. 1-3 and Invocation, ll. 76-77.
- <sup>52</sup> Green Song, ll. 1-16 and Street Acrobat, ll. 60-64.





- <sup>53</sup> Song: Once my heart was a summer rose, ll. 23-26.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., ll. 31-33.
- <sup>55</sup> Green Flows the River of Lethe - O, ll. 14-28.
- <sup>56</sup> At Cockcrow, ll. 29-34.
- <sup>57</sup> Mary Stuart to James Bothwell. . ., ll. 25-41.
- <sup>58</sup> Jones, A History of Western Philosophy, 183-193.
- <sup>59</sup> Street Song, ll. 15-16, and Poor Young Simpleton, l. 71.
- <sup>60</sup> The Song of the Cold, ll. 70-74.
- <sup>61</sup> Invocation, ll. 15-20; Dirge for the New Sunrise, l. 22 and Poor Young Simpleton, ll. 60-63.
- <sup>62</sup> Still Falls the Rain, l. 11.
- <sup>63</sup> Street Acrobat, ll. 4-6.
- <sup>64</sup> The Song of the Cold, l. 20.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid., ll. 67-74.
- <sup>66</sup> The Shadow of Cain 12-17; Street Acrobat ll. 144 and The Song of the Cold, ll. 16-19.
- <sup>67</sup> The Song of the Cold, ll. 1-15 and Invocation, ll. 19-20.
- <sup>68</sup> The Song of the Cold, l. 43 and Dirge for the New Sunrise, l. 34.
- <sup>69</sup> Street Acrobat, ll. 12-15 and Street Song, ll. 7-8.
- <sup>70</sup> Street Song, ll. 13-16 and Gardeners and Astronomers, ll. 37-43.
- <sup>71</sup> Lo, this is she that was the world's desire, ll. 20-31.
- <sup>72</sup> Bagatelle, ll. 34-38 and The Song of the Cold, ll. 115-116.



<sup>73</sup>The Poet Laments the Coming of Old Age, ll. 37-38; O Bitter Love, O Death. . ., l. 22 and The Song of the Cold, l. 104.

<sup>74</sup>Green Flows the River of Lethe - O, l. 25 and Heart and Mind, ll. 1-8.

<sup>75</sup>Dido's Song, ll. 8-10.

<sup>76</sup>Green Flows the River of Lethe - O, ll. 1-5 and 23-25.

<sup>77</sup>Heart and Mind, ll. 8-16 and Prometheus' Song, ll. 7-12.

<sup>78</sup>The Song of the Cold, ll. 1-34 and Invocation, l. 21.

<sup>79</sup>An Old Woman, ll. 28-30 and Harvest, ll. 35-38.

<sup>80</sup>An Old Woman, ll. 12-27.

<sup>81</sup>The Song of the Cold, ll. 62-71 and The Shadow of Cain, ll. 107-108.

<sup>82</sup>The Song of the Cold, ll. 69-74.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., ll. 1-34.

<sup>84</sup>The Coat of Fire, ll. 9-11.

<sup>85</sup>Dirge for the New Sunrise, ll. 25-31; The Shadow of Cain, ll. 79-96 and The Canticle of the Rose, ll. 14-20.

<sup>86</sup>Invocation, ll. 10-12 and Poor Young Simpleton, ll. 64-67.

<sup>87</sup>Invocation, ll. 15-20.

<sup>88</sup>The Shadow of Cain, ll. 79-86.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., ll. 93-96 and 97-105.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., ll. 90-96.

<sup>91</sup>The Two Loves, ll. 32-40.

<sup>92</sup>Still Falls the Rain, ll. 27-34.



<sup>93</sup>The Canticle of the Rose, ll. 1-5 and 50-57.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., ll. 56-57.

<sup>95</sup>The Coat of Fire, ll. 48-75.

<sup>96</sup>Invocation, ll. 22-26 and Green Song, ll. 1-16.

<sup>97</sup>Lo, this is she that was the world's desire, ll. 1-36.

<sup>98</sup>Heart and Mind, l. 2 and Dido's Song, ll. 1-4.

<sup>99</sup>O Yet Forgive, l. 1.

<sup>100</sup>The Canticle of the Rose, ll. 17-19.

<sup>101</sup>Street Song, ll. 13-20; Poor Young Simpleton, ll. 12-65 and Gardeners and Astronomers, ll. 28-49.

<sup>102</sup>The Shadow of Cain, l. 52.

<sup>103</sup>Seranade: Any Man to Any Woman, ll. 25-26 and The Shadow of Cain, ll. 90-92.

<sup>104</sup>The Coat of Fire, ll. 48-71 and Dirge for the New Sunrise, ll. 22-25.

### Chapter III

<sup>1</sup>How Many Heavens, ll. 5-23 and The Bee-Keeper, ll. 17-41.

<sup>2</sup>An Old Woman, ll. 7-31.

<sup>3</sup>Beside the Yellow Foam that Sings of Lydian Airs, ll. 57-62 and Elegy for Dylan Thomas, ll. 19-23.

<sup>4</sup>Beside the Yellow Foam that Sings of Lydian Airs, ll. 103-109.

<sup>5</sup>How Many Heavens, l. 13.

<sup>6</sup>Hymn to Venus, ll. 41-47.





- <sup>7</sup>An Old Woman, ll. 7-31.
- <sup>8</sup>The Bee-Keeper, ll. 1-46.
- <sup>9</sup>Tattered Serenade: Beggar to Shadow, ll. 36-53 and Holiday, ll. 12-39.
- <sup>10</sup>Invocation, ll. 22-91.
- <sup>11</sup>Gardeners and Astronomers, ll. 60-62.
- <sup>12</sup>Invocation, An Old Woman and Gardeners and Astronomers.
- <sup>13</sup>Mills, "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," 54.
- <sup>14</sup>Eurydice, ll. 63-64.
- <sup>15</sup>Green Song, ll. 72-77.
- <sup>16</sup>The Queen of Scotland's Reply to a Reproof from John Knox, ll. 14-17.
- <sup>17</sup>Green Song, ll. 6-16 and The Flowering Forest, ll. 4-14.
- <sup>18</sup>A Hymn to Venus, ll. 38-40 and Beside the Yellow Foam that Sings of Lydian Airs, ll. 103-107.
- <sup>19</sup>Beside the Yellow Foam that Sings of Lydian Airs, l. 3 and The Wind of Early Spring, ll. 1-2.
- <sup>20</sup>Out of School, ll. 81-82.
- <sup>21</sup>Mills, "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," 57.
- <sup>22</sup>How Many Heavens, ll. 5-23 and The Bee-Keeper, ll. 17-41.
- <sup>23</sup>An Old Woman, ll. 1-31.
- <sup>24</sup>Invocation, ll. 22-40; Tattered Serenade: Beggar to Shadow, ll. 36-53 and How Many Heavens. . . , ll. 1-23.
- <sup>25</sup>An Old Woman, l. 65 and 77; Eurydice, ll. 64-66 and The Bee-Keeper, ll. 52-54.



<sup>26</sup>Beside the Yellow Foam that Sings of Lydian Airs, ll. 72-74.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., ll. 103-109.

<sup>28</sup>Gardeners and Astronomers, ll. 53-62.

<sup>29</sup>Song for Two Voices, The Youth with the Red-Gold Hair, and Beside the Yellow Foam that Sings of Lydian Airs, ll. 2-3 and 103-104.

<sup>30</sup>The Wind of Early Spring, ll. 2-4; Gardeners and Astronomers, ll. 2-6 and 54-58; The Canticle of the Rose, ll. 1-13 and 51-60 and The Queen of Scotland's Reply to a Reproof from John Knox, l. 1.

<sup>31</sup>Green Song, ll. 1-16; The Flowering Forest and An Old Woman, ll. 42-46.

<sup>32</sup>Sir James G. Frazer, The Golden Bough (London: Macmillan and Company, 1960), 553.

<sup>33</sup>The Song of the Cold, ll. 107-116 and 'Lo, this is She that was the World's Desire', ll. 17-22.

<sup>34</sup>Eurydice, ll. 81-84 and The Youth with the Red-Gold Hair, ll. 1-2.

<sup>35</sup>Beside the Yellow Foam that Sings of Lydian Airs, ll. 6-16; Harvest, ll. 39-41 and A Bird's Song.

<sup>36</sup>Jane Ellen Harrison, Themis. (2nd ed. Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962), 158-180.

<sup>37</sup>Holiday, ll. 62-64 and Harvest, ll. 84-86.

<sup>38</sup>An Old Woman, l. 77 and Harvest, l. 21.

<sup>39</sup>Holiday, ll. 59-61 and Harvest, l. 68.

<sup>40</sup>The Two Loves, ll. 32-40.

<sup>41</sup>Mills, "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," 57-58.

<sup>42</sup>Read, John. Through Alchemy to Chemistry. (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1963), 15.





<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 30-32.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>51</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 146.

<sup>52</sup>Read, Through Alchemy to Chemistry, 59-60.

<sup>53</sup>Invocation, l. 73 and The Bee-Keeper, ll. 49-51.

<sup>54</sup>An Old Woman, ll. 30-39, and Gardeners and Astronomers, ll. 2-6.

<sup>55</sup>The Bee-Oracles, ll. 1-3.

<sup>56</sup>Invocation, l. 22 and Green Song, l. 58.

<sup>57</sup>Green Song, ll. 8-10; The Two Loves, l. 35 and A Hymn to Venus, ll. 12-13.

<sup>58</sup>The Bee-Keeper, ll. 17-32 and Beside the Yellow Foam that Sings of Lydian Airs, ll. 68-69.

<sup>59</sup>Gardeners and Astronomers, ll. 54-58.

## Conclusion

<sup>1</sup>Out of School, ll. 80-82 and Beside the Yellow Foam that Sings of Lydian Airs, ll. 10-16.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

#### 1. Books by Edith Sitwell

Sitwell, Edith. The Augustan Books of Modern Poetry Edith Sitwell.  
London: Benn, 1926.

------. Bucolic Comedies. London: Duckworth, 1923.

------. Children's Tales from the Russian Ballet. London:  
Parsons, 1920.

------. Clown's Houses. Oxford: Blackwell, 1918.

------. Collected Poems. London: Duckworth, 1930.

------. Collected Poems. London: Macmillan, 1961.

------. Elegy on Dead Fashion. London: Duckworth, 1926.

------. Gold Coast Customs. London: Duckworth, 1929.

------. The Outcasts. London: Macmillan, 1962.

------. Poetry and Criticism. London: The Hogarth Press, 1925.

------. Rustic Elegies. London: Duckworth, 1927.

------. The Sleeping Beauty. London: Duckworth, 1924.

------. Taken Care Of. London: Hutchinson, 1965.

------. Twentieth Century Harlequinade. Oxford: Blackwell, 1916.

------. The Wooden Pegasus. Oxford: Blackwell, 1920.



2. Books edited by and with contributions by Edith Sitwell.

Gawsworth, John. Ten Contemporaries. London: Benn, 1932.

Sitwell, Edith, ed. Wheels [First Cycle]. Oxford: Blackwell, 1916.

----- . Wheels: A Second Cycle. Oxford: Blackwell, 1917.

----- . Wheels: A Third Cycle. Oxford: Blackwell, 1919.

----- . Wheels 1919 Fourth Cycle. Oxford: Blackwell, 1919.

----- . Wheels 1920 Fifth Cycle. London: Parsons, 1920.

----- . Wheels [Sixth Cycle]. London: C. W. Daniel, 1921.

Sitwell, Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell. Trio. London: Macmillan, 1938.

Tradition and Experiment in Present-Day Literature. London: Humphrey Milford, 1929.

3. Articles by Edith Sitwell.

Sitwell, Edith. "Lecture on Poetry Since 1920," Life and Letters To-day, XXXIX, (November, 1943), 70-97.

----- . "Modern Values," Spectator, CXLI, (December 22, 1928), 950-951.

----- . "Some Notes on My Own Poetry," London Mercury, XXXI, (March, 1935), 453.

----- . "Some Notes on the Making of a Poem," Orpheus, I, (1948), 69-75.

Secondary Sources

1. Books.

The English Association. The Year's Work in English Studies, XXXI-XLIV. London: Oxford University Press and John Murray, 1952-1963.





Fifoot, Richard. A Bibliography of Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963.

Frazer, Sir James George. The Golden Bough. London: Macmillan, 1960. [1894]

Frye, Northrop. Anatomy of Criticism. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

Harrison, Jane Ellen. Themis. Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962. [1912]

Jones, W. J. A History of Western Philosophy. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952.

Monro, Harold. Some Contemporary Poets. London: Parsons, 1920.

Muir, Edwin. Transition. London: Hogarth, 1926.

## 2. Articles

Green, Timothy. "'I am an Electric Eel in a Pond of Catfish,'" Life, LIV, (January 4, 1963), 62.

Hassan, Ihab H. "Edith Sitwell and the Symbolist Tradition," Comparative Literature, VII, (Summer, 1955), 240-51.

Mills, Ralph J., Jr. "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," Chicago Review, XIV, (Spring, 1961), 33-64.

Rosenberg, Lois D. "Edith Sitwell: A Critical Bibliography, 1915-1950," Bulletin of Bibliography, XXI, 40-43 and 57-60.

Vickery, John B. "The Golden Bough and Modern Poetry," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, XV, (March, 1957), 271-288.





**B29856**